Hollywood to Bollywood: PETA’s “Naked” Campaign

Communications Audit

C. Aaron Westbrook
3/19/2014
Hollywood to Bollywood: PETA’s “Naked” campaign

ABSTRACT:

With more than 3 million supporters, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) is “the largest animal rights organization in the world” (PETA). Founded with the motivation to boost awareness about the unethical treatment of animals, PETA has been widely criticized for its PR tactics and “colorful and controversial demonstrations. Although the communication environment in which the non-profit originated (America) welcomes such suggestive messaging, PETA has been challenged with tailoring that suggestive messaging across cultures as it has expanded into international markets.

As PETA seeks to generate a following in India, it is being met with the challenge of coordinating and controlling the messaging of its “Naked” campaign which features high profile stars stripping nude to show their support for animal rights. This study will examine how PETA has become a glocal organization and will provide insight into how those challenges have directly affected the public relation practices of PETA in the Indian market.

CULTURAL ANALYSIS:

In an effort to rationalize the efforts expressed by PETA through its India campaign, we must first understand the cultural differences the host market and foreign market possess. The cultural analysis will overview relevant cultural characteristics each nation expresses in an effort to justify PETA’s implementation of the “Naked” campaign internationally.

AMERICA

As a high individualistic society, “the degree of independence a society maintains among its members” (Hofstede), America embraces the notion that “self-expressiveness” is “to be valued as a major goal of life” (Yankelovich, 1998). “Being an individualist is not only a good thing; it is a quintessentially American thing” (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeir, 2002). The American culture is much
more accepting to corporations and individuals who test the culturally acceptable boundaries because they recognize one's right to free speech.

The American culture is strong in agenda setting. Often criticized for its “dominating” and “controlling” mentality, it seeks to infringe its beliefs on individuals and nations. Much of that may be contributed toward its low power distance perception, “the extent to which the less powerful people” of society “accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede).

As a highly competitive market, masculinity ranks significantly high in the American culture. Hofstede expresses that “competition, achievement, and success” are the driving factors behind supporting masculinity, which ultimately leads to a higher individualistic society.

**INDIA:**

Contrary to the low sensitivity America expresses toward sexual content, India and the Middle East tend to possess more conservative views and look to protect sensuality to a more intimate setting. As a feminine society, Indian families value their culture and family ideals, forcing many corporations to develop a tailored campaign that avoids confliction with the traditional views of the Indian culture. India is a “family oriented” culture and individuals typically hold family values higher than personal value; often times forsaking “individual wishes and also happiness” for the sake of family.

Despite being “one of the oldest civilizations” and being instrumental in developing our concept of sexuality, India has developed into a culture that expresses contradictory philosophical views; tolerance for nudity and western culture was acceptable as art in southern India during ancient times. The acceptance of nudity has “improved in India in recent years” however; visuals that openly promote “naked flesh is often still a deal-breaker when it comes to censorship” (Denham, 2014). Indecency and obscene scenes that display nudity in both film and publication is mandated by the government appointed Central Board, making sexually oriented publications virtually “illegal in India” (Chakroberty & Thakurata, 2013)
**ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS**

PETA:

Established in 1980, PETA is the largest animal rights activist group initiated by Ingrid Newkirk and Alex Pacheco in Norfolk, Virginia. PETA has rallied more than three million supporters worldwide, and in 2013 alone it generated over $35 million in contributions (PETA). The non-profit has four main target groups each with varying objectives:

- **Consumers** - In an effort to “convince them to not buy meat or fur coats and to avoid cosmetic companies that test their products on animals”
- **Businesses** – Focused on getting “them to change their ways”
- **Lawmakers** – Lobbying to push for “legal reforms”
- **Mass Media** – Primarily to circulate “free coverage in the mass media through PSA’s (Public Service Announcements) and publicity stunts to reach its other intended audiences”

Source: (Bergstrom, n.d.).

**THE “NAKED” CAMPAIGN:**

For years, PETA has been an active producer of shock advertisements; “a method of advertising that purposely offends and startles its viewers in an attempt to “gain attention, encourage cognitive processing and have an immediate impact on behavior” (Kabir & Rao, 2012). Labeled the “Naked” Campaign, PETA has admitted its “colorful and controversial demonstrations” were initiated to “grab headlines” and “get the animal rights message to as many people as possible”.

Despite successful shock tactics in the United States by PETA, its India affiliate is hesitant to have its featured superstars bare it all. Considering the “conservative” (Kabir & Rao, 2012) views of the average Indian, a majority of the PETA ads in India often show less skin and many are supported with a different motive (See Appendix). In India, PETA promotes the vegetarian lifestyle choice as fashionable and attractive to appeal to a younger audience. The ads feature famed Bollywood stars in natural and
green themed clothing in an effort to make the vegan lifestyle more attractive and to signify that it’s somewhat of a fashion statement to be a vegetarian. Though the motive behind the campaign is the same as other international business units, the call for higher coordination when implementing public relation practices in culturally conscious and collective societies is evident and significant in this particular PETA campaign.

Considering the cultural differences, PETA is given the task of implementing its highly publicized campaign with a considerable level of standardization and customization to their messaging. As a culturally conscience transnational organization, PETA is met with the challenge of tailoring its messaging and PR efforts without altering its key messaging objectives. As PR practitioners often cite, PETA is an example of a glocal organization; a product or service that is “tailored to conform with local laws, customs or consumer preferences” (Investopedia, n.d.).

The mission for the India affiliate bares many similarities to its US counterpart; however, as the examples in the appendix have expressed, the dynamics in cultural differences has influenced PETA to conform the messaging of its campaigns in an effort to both avoid confrontation and increase acceptance.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

As affirmed earlier, PETA was organized to influence four specific target markets; consumers, businesses, law makers, and the mass media. It has effectively influenced the dialogue amongst consumers and mass media; however some may view the tactics in persuading businesses to alter their processes as harsh. Often times comparing their efforts to protect animal rights to that of rape, domestic abuse and other crimes, PETA’s mission has been considered “absurd” and “egregious” (Holt, 2012).

According to Hofstede, America’s uncertainty avoidance, how a country views “unstructured ideas and situation”, is higher than that of India. Though even with the higher score, “the [American]
public is distrustful of [the PETA] organization”, due to their harsh and “disrespectful” (Rivas, 2012) messaging. As a more conservative society (India) I foresee much friction developing not only between the regulators of speech, but also with the older public and business owners within the country.

The Central Board, who regulates the media in India, often requires major Hollywood films to edit and extract nude scenes from their movies before they premiere in India. In fact, the first movie to allow a fully nude depiction of a lady was 12 Years a Slave, an Academy Award winning film that was released in 2013. The board deemed the nude scene was necessary toward the effectiveness of the films messaging. However, is the nudity in PETA advertisements necessary toward the effectiveness of their research and mission? Though it causes quite the ruckus when you see one of the stars you admire virtually naked in an advertisement to push an animal rights agenda forward, the effectiveness in altering one of the four perceptions in the affirmed target audiences is often not met. In fact, the American based organization often has to go to even more extremes to push its agenda forward; engaging in protest and bullish activities.

I recommend that PETA India partner with more established businesses and organizations that have a positive and respected audience in an effort to become a culturally accepted non-profit. Among the top recommendations to create an effective PR campaign in India, practitioners stated one should build a dialogue with your listening audience. PETA has already identified an “industry issue” (Image Management, n.d.) but now they need to let the public decide how they want to solve it; create a compelling story, and go digital to boost engagement.

The Asia-Pacific market prizes education more so than the average American consumer. Therefore providing additional guidance is necessary in order to become more effective in this region. PETA does understand this concept and although its US based website is visually appealing compared to that of the India facing website, Petaindia.org provides extensive information about certain issues and the rationale behind their motives.
Beyond the use of celebrity appeal, I recommend that PETA focus its PR efforts on how animal rights affect the community and indirectly affect one's family. The Indian culture is reliant on its elders and their beliefs are often observed by the younger generations. Much of PETA’s success has come from the revolt of individuals who seek to change their ways and processes despite how they were raised. However, after conducting the cultural differences between India and America, I am lead to assume that there is a lack in the willingness to do so in the Indian culture.

I commend PETA for its efforts in expanding internationally and implementing a glocal approach to its “Naked” campaign. It should be recognized for its extraordinary efforts in building awareness around animal rights and its organization. The organization has done a phenomenal job in establishing international credibility, however, in order to further its global influence and effectiveness the company needs to seek out alternative tactics that not only avoids confrontation with authorities but are culturally acceptable.
References


Appendix: India Campaign Examples
Appendix: India Campaign Examples
Appendix: USA Campaign Examples