

Is your brilliant global idea just greek to your audience?

 By [Stuart Walsh](#)

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Not very long ago, a piece of research emerged in the UK, claiming the way parents were cosseting their children was actually harming them. By keeping their precious little angels in pristine, freshly vacuumed rooms, away from the numerous germ-laden threats posed by the dog dirt, dead spiders, muddy ponds (tadpoles optional) and various fruits and berries of dubious edibility, not only were they depriving the children of some of the best fun a five-year-old could ever have - if you've never had a frog pee on your face as you pick it up to show a friend, you haven't lived - but they were also depriving the children's immune systems of a vital ingredient for its development: something to fight.



Photo by Meghan Holmes on [Unsplash](#).

Without coming into contact with yuckiness, the immune system can't build up antibodies to defend against its harmful effects. That's the basic principle behind vaccines: expose the body to a small, almost inconsequential amount of a pathogen, and it will be stimulated into producing antibodies to defend against that pathogen should it ever return in force, bringing its big brother or something.

'Dirt is Good'

The researchers were first alerted that something may be up by a steep incline in the incidence of childhood asthma. They posited that the near-clinical environments parents were creating with their Dyson vacuums and anti-bacterial cleaners had robbed growing children of exposure to dust mites, pollen, germs, and other irritants. They'd robbed them of any opportunity their growing bodies had of learning to cope and combat with the ills of the real world. Plainly put, kids shouldn't just be allowed to get dirty when they play, they need to get dirty for their healthy development.

The rest is the stuff of marketing legend. "Dirt is Good" is one of the most inspired positionings in the history of advertising. And what made it all the more powerful was the fact that it was for a washing powder (Persil/Omo), at a time when most washing powders were obsessed with the banalities of white versus whiter.

Here was a universal insight: all kids needed to be exposed to dirt to grow healthily, and a washing powder able to remove any traces of that same dirt afterwards. The Americans would call it a home run. And it should have been. But it wasn't. At least not at the beginning.

The 'beginning' was not that far back: the early 2000's when the ever-increasing interconnectedness and interdependence of people around the world was awakening many brand owners to the prospect of global marketing. Indeed, it's been such a relatively short time since our industry-first embraced the concept of globalisation that there is still little to no best practice set down as to how to approach the task.



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Making a local connection

Unilever developed two campaigns off the initial big idea with an ad for South Africa (and other developing regions) featuring a young boy scoring a goal and celebrating by diving through mud puddles and other dirt, obliterating the white kit he was wearing. He didn't have a care in the world because his mum used Omo, so the dirt was of no consequence. Or shouldn't have been.

But this is where my long ramble finally gets to the topic I was assigned "How global brands make a local connection." You see, making a local connection is not always as simple as adding some shots using local talent or changing pack-shots to reflect those in the market or even an entire re-shoot of the concept in a local setting.

The reason it's important is because even a brilliant idea like Dirt is Good can stumble, as it reportedly did in South Africa initially. The problem was, it didn't matter how good the washing powder was at getting dirt and stains out of clothes, those clothes (school uniform etc.) cost a lot of money and mums from disadvantaged backgrounds just couldn't buy into this idea of willful negligence on the part of the child in the ad, even if it was for their eventual good.

Unilever and their agencies soon realised that no matter how universal an insight may appear to be, it will always be interpreted differently by people with different value systems. You might want to be a brand seen as a leader, but what an English person sees as leadership qualities may be very different from what a South African sees. Values define culture and culture dictates how your brand is perceived. Think of how an individualist, freedom-promising brand would go down in the collectivist cultures of Asia.



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Adapting talent and messaging

Even in countries that may seem similar, there are subtle differences. The German and British levels of development and their (at the time of writing) membership of the same club might suggest a similar approach could be adopted for both. But the Germans prefer a more formal tone of voice and more seriousness than the British.

So, while the choice for brands, as they travel across cultures, is between a standardised global approach or localisation (both of which have pros and cons), the key to global brand success lies in not just adapting talent and messaging, but adapting to the actual values and therefore the culture of the region in which they market.

A standardised brand name, logo, packaging, etc. just aid recognition. Real success comes when brands become immersed in every aspect of a culture and use their outsider's perspective to raise and solve local cultural problems. This doesn't mean abandoning the brand's DNA, in fact, it's vital that it's preserved. But you can still adapt to local culture while doing so. McDonald's is brilliant at this with its local menu items. But it's still the same McDonald's they have in the US, UK, and Japan.



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So the big lesson for those in their London, New York and LA offices plotting global domination with a single ad: have a chat to your people on the ground in your markets around the world. They might, just might, have that little bit of insight that catapults your idea from being Greek, to being gold.

ABOUT STUART WALSH

Stuart's previous career as an award-winning creative means he is one of very few strategists who has won both creative awards (including Cannes, One Show, ADC and Loeries) as well as effectiveness awards such as Effie and APEX. Prior to Boundless, he was CSO of Grey for 6 years, in addition to stints at Metropolitan Republic, DDB and Yellowwood. As well as some rubbish places.

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