

The BP boss and other language lapses

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LONDON, UK: As BP pledges to protect "small" people, Cream and Today Translations examines other examples of poorly chosen words, translation gaffes and cultural blunders.

Just to be clear, BP were not talking about elves, leprechauns or the hobbits in Lord of the Rings but "the small people" whom the oil company BP cares about, according to its chairman, Carl-Henric Svanberg, when he said "We care about the small people".

After meeting recently with President Obama to discuss the Deepwater Horizon oil-spill disaster, Svanberg informed the world's media, "We care about the small people. I hear comments sometimes that large oil companies, or greedy companies, don't care. But that is not case in BP; we care about the small people."

The problem is that Swedish Svanberg is a fluent English speaker but not a native one and appears not to have consulted a professional linguist before making his pronouncement. So, while trying to sound caring, humble and apologetic by saying that that BP cared about the ordinary folks affected by the oil spill, Svanberg's clumsy use of English ended up making both himself and BP sound at best lofty, remote and out-of-touch, and at worst arrogant and condescending.

Not only was Svanberg's intended message lost in translation but a pronouncement that was meant to improve BP's battered image only ended up battering it further, Svanberg himself was exposed to both criticism and some ridicule. He later apologised for the comment and the fact that he "spoke clumsily".

"If only he'd asked a linguist!", says Jurga Zilinskiene, MD of London-based Today Translations.

Svanberg can console himself that it could have been worse - or, indeed, that it has been down the years for other companies, which have seen their marketing, branding and PR efforts not just lost in translation but shipwrecked.

Ten more translation blunders of international marketing, PR and branding

1. Buy our new car. . . Er, it doesn't go

The story of Chevy's Nova car and how it was marketed as such in Latin America, even though "Nova" literally means in Spanish, "It doesn't go" must be the most famous tale of its kind.

In fact, the story isn't true at all and is instead the marketing equivalent of an urban myth. Like some of the other examples

quoted below, it has, nonetheless, entered the folklore of international marketing.

Some car companies, on the other hand, have been guilty of putting more effort into coming up with a funky name for a new model than into checking what it means in the languages of key target markets, as the blog mediamaquiladora.com recently pointed out:

"A couple of years ago Kia, to much fanfare and with a Hispanic audience among its primary targets, launched the rugged "Borrego" which translates literally to "lamb". Not to be outdone, though only sold in Asia, Nissan unveiled their own bogie or booger, or "Moco" to an adoring public. But the favourite of all, even better I think than Chevy's Nova, has to be Mazda's Laputa. Who wouldn't want to jump in that ride?"

"La puta" in Spanish, of course, means "the whore".

2. The future's bright, the future's... Protestant loyalist?

The telecoms brand Orange is generally considered a great marketing success story, as was the launch across the UK in the 1990s of what was to become its famous slogan: "The future's bright... the future's Orange".

This was an uncontroversial suggestion in most parts of the UK but rather less so among the Catholic population of Northern Ireland, where the term "Orange" is linked to the Orange Order, the Protestant organisation, viewed by many Catholics as both sectarian and hostile.

As often with translation, the problem in this case hinged not just on the word but on the culture.

3. Buy our baby food, made with real babies?

Gerber is the name of one of America's best-known makers of baby food but "gerber" can also be translated into French as "to vomit" - somewhat limiting for the brand's next global marketing push.

Wisely, the name is not marketed in France but, according to adweek.com, "...there is a French Canadian web page that reads, 'Les aliments pour bébés Gerber ne sont disponibles pour l'instant qu'aux Etats-Unis' (translated: The baby food Gerber [to vomit] is not here, try the US)."

Meanwhile, when Gerber started selling baby food in Africa, they placed a picture of a cute baby on the label of their jars, just as they do in America - but without realising that the practice in some African markets where many consumers are illiterate, is for brands to put pictures of the contents on the labels...

4. Sucks like an Electrolux

Unfamiliar with the finer points of English slang the Scandinavian company Electrolux marketed its vacuum cleaner in the English-speaking world with the slogan, 'Nothing sucks like an Electrolux'.

There is some debate about whether this was an unwitting mistake or a deliberate one, made for comic effect.

5. Fly Braniff Airlines: Fly naked

There's nothing like the smell and feel of real leather. That, at least, was the message that Braniff Airlines was trying to communicate when it launched its "fly in leather" message to the Hispanic and Latin America market to promote the airline's new first-class seats.

Braniff translated the call to "fly in leather" too literally for the purpose of the local market, rendering it with the slogan "vuela en cuero", which literally means "fly in leather", but which sounds identical in a radio ad to "vuela en cueros", the Spanish

for "fly naked".

6. His Holiness, the potato

When the Pope paid an official visit to Miami, a local T-shirt maker produced commemorative T-shirts for hawking to the Hispanic market - instead of declaring, "I saw the Pope" ("el Papa"), the T-shirts allegedly read, "I saw the Potato" ("la Papa").

7. Buy our pens. They won't make you pregnant

Parker Pens are proud of the fact that unlike some cheap ballpoints, its pens won't leak in your pocket and cause embarrassment. That was the message they sought to convey to the Mexican market, but without realising the Mexican Spanish word for "embarazar" does not mean "to embarrass" but "to impregnate". Result: an ad for Parker Pens that reads, "It won't leak in your pocket and make you pregnant."

8. Are you lactating?

Many of these stories seem to involve Mexico, possibly because it's often the first foreign language market into which American marketers venture.

The US Dairy Association was reportedly so pleased with the success of its "Got milk?" campaign that it decided to extend it to neighbouring Mexico. The only problem was that the Spanish translation of "Got Milk?" that it came up with allegedly read as "Are you lactating?"

9. Pepsi: Generation resurrection

Western companies can find translating their marketing message into Chinese a particular challenge, as Pepsi allegedly discovered when insufficient attention to translation nuances led it to translate "Come alive with the Pepsi Generation" as "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave".

10. Things go better with ... Er, bite the wax tadpole

When Coke first looked into rendering the name "Coca-Cola" into Chinese it came up with a translation that, depending on the precise dialect, meant either "bite the wax tadpole" or "female horse stuffed with wax".

Another version of this story claims that such unfortunate translations were the work of some local Chinese shop-keepers, anticipating Coke's arrival in China, and producing their own unofficial marketing material, without the knowledge or authority of Coke.

According to the official version, Coke's entry to the Chinese market was meticulously planned. It involved Coke researching 40 000 Chinese characters, until it found the perfect translation, which literally meant, "Happiness in the mouth".