

MONITOR  
**TOPIC Cultural exchange**

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The nuts and bolts of culturally sensitive production

When Burger King launched its Whopper Virgins campaign last December, asking people in remote regions of Thailand, Romania and Greenland to sample its burger for the first time, dubbed the "World's Purest Taste Test", critics were quick to pounce.

Accusations of insensitivity and even "corporate colonialism", according to one Huffington Post columnist, abounded. Meanwhile, the mounting press clips resulted in yet another BK campaign that created a swirl of controversy and attention - even Saturday Night Live parodied the doc-style spot from Crispin Porter + Bogusky (who were unavailable for comment) and director Stacy Peralta (Dogtown and Z-Boys).

But are the accusations fair? Corporate colonialism hints at exploitation for capitalist gain. Is it a matter of pulling the wool over the eyes of local populations for profit?

Commercial productions choose to shoot in remote areas and work with local, non-professional actors for a variety of reasons, including the novelty of the location and the authenticity that locals bring to a performance. But there are factors that are taken into account to ensure the experience is mutually beneficial rather than exploitative.

"You can get advertising engagement all sorts of ways: with humor, shock value, controversy. And some brands are willing to accept a certain amount of polarization," says Amy Shea, executive vice president, global director of market research firm **Brand Keys**. "But I don't think about cultural sensitivity that way."

With 25 years experience, Shea has conducted brand research for companies such as IBM and participated in ARF/AAA's Committee to Study Emotional Response in Advertising. She says that when dealing with issues that could be culturally sensitive, the best option is to test.

"I remember a major brand testing for IBM. We tested an ad their competitor had used in China," says Shea. "There was a dragon in the ad that to our mind would be quite playful. Not so much with the Chinese. To them, the dragon is wholly and culturally a significant symbol and it was not to be used in this playful way. It was important for us to understand that because on the surface you might get people who said they didn't like the ad, but you have to get at what's really troubling them."

Issues of cultural sensitivity are usually met with emotional responses, which is why Shea says it's important to use emotion-based metrics. But with such a broad demographic of viewers, compounded by the fact that spots can be seen online, it's difficult to not hit at least a few nerves. For everyone who might decry an ad, others won't see the problem with its depiction.

On the ground, however, issues of cultural sensitivity are more defined.

EPs Dale and Brin Kushner from Cape Town's AFS Productions have extensive experience working with local tribes, including a recent shoot with Namibia's Himba tribe for Dow. The key, says Brin, is clarity.

"With the nature of film a lot of people are worried they might get exploited," he says. "So it's very important that we approach the tribal leaders or people who control an area and talk them through every step of what we are trying to achieve."

Having that interaction with local leaders also clears up cultural differences in remuneration. The Himba, for example, prefer payment in food over money. In one incident, the Himba slaughtered, skinned and cooked their payment in front of AFS and the client. "But you can't in any way make it seem out of place," warns Brin. "You've got to realize that this is their culture."

Governments also act as a buffer to ensure people's dignity is respected. "The Mali government takes a deposit, which it gives back once it receives a copy of the commercial," says Dale. "It can't show the people in any bad light."

"It's a responsibility thing for me," says casting director Veronica Souto, who cast people in remote regions of Latin America for Natura "Borders". "I try to understand the people when I cast them and see what their motivations are. Some just like to appear on TV, but some people really need the money and those are the realities."

It's then up to the clients how much they want to give back to the regions and its people for accommodating their campaigns.

For the non-profit OLPC's Give One Get One. Change the World campaign, shot in the township of Langa, South Africa by Egg Films, the contribution was apparent. "It was a cause that everyone from us to the cast got excited about because education and giving children laptops is so important," says producer Colin Howard. "It was relevant to the people there, so we had a lot of support for what we were doing."

Oft overlooked in the criticism leveled at BK is the company's donation of educational supplies to Thailand and Greenland, and its funding towards the restoration of a 17th century Romanian church to thank the participants. The spot also sees villagers sharing traditional dishes with the crew in a spirit of cultural exchange.

Treading culturally sensitive ground is never fail-proof and the potential to stir debate or raise ire exists, particularly for larger corporate entities like Burger King, who tend to be subject to greater media scrutiny. Still, as experience indicates, a degree of understanding and reciprocal benefit goes a long way in exploring the farthest reaches of the globe.

AFS Productions <http://www.afsproductions.com>

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