

Love in the desert

Being trusted and respected is not enough for US brands in the Middle East. They need to create an emotional link

In the 1970s – before Theodore Levitt's hymn to homogenised markets, before the Intifada, Afghanistan, Iraq, al-Qaeda and theories on US brandlash – I worked in the Middle East for 13 years for three multinationals: Gillette, Procter & Gamble and Pepsi. What I learned lays to waste the local/global ping pong argument raging through the world's boardrooms.

The strapline swings between "Think Global Act Local," "Think Local Act Global" and Coca-Cola's "Think local; act local". These slogans are acted on by the Think Too Big Gang, who roll out a global idea and forget to make the most of local insights; and the Think Too Small Crowd who prevent big ideas from travelling far or fast enough.

Starting with the local is right, but "think" is wrong. "Think" is not fast or transforming, emotional, or inspiring. Our take is: "Act local; go global." What will make the difference is action. Its fountainhead is emotion. Brain scientist Donald Calne nails it: "The essential difference between emotion and reason is that emotion leads to action, while reason leads to conclusions."

Brands can't lose their past. But they can create their future. Arab consumers don't simply see the Middle Eastern conflict in terms of Islamic idealism – it's a fight against American commercialism dictating actions in the region. This isn't a problem a change in foreign policy can solve. Brands have to stop 'selling' to consumers and separate themselves from America's national commercial interest. They need to start 'loving' what consumers in the Middle East care about in their lives. And that's a fundamental shift in marketing ideology – not a review of the sales numbers, but a real commitment and empathy to connecting with people.

Most American brands were, at best, trusted in the Middle East – solid globally-respected, performance-based, reliable products. Many brands have long translated the universal values to which they appeal in locally-relevant ways. But beyond the trust they earned, many over nearly 50 years, few had invested emotionally.

Reputation was swept away by consumers' fundamental discord with country of origin. And substitution became possible with ever-growing choice and quality of local product with an inherently deeper appeal to emotional loyalty. Economics played its part, as the region's consumers became poorer and the local alternatives priced better. Herfy's could replace McDonald's. Al Marai could replace Kraft. Zam Zam Cola (or Mecca Cola) could replace Coca Cola.

At the core of a great brand, local or global, lies a human truth – which shouldn't be lost. The first challenge is to identify it, the second to connect

with this truth in a local context. Most anti-American brand consumer sentiment has emanated from the mosques and schools. Consumers need to find faith again in American brands.

Actions speak louder than words. To move into the heart of the culture, American brands should shift towards major corporate social responsibility programmes. This demonstrates commitment, empathy and passion. In many markets, people have been educated in schools and treated in hospitals built by brands. This kind of social contribution is not just irreplaceable. It is irresistible.

Right now, Procter & Gamble has got double-digit growth across its brands in the Middle East. For a long time it has been getting closer to the Arab consumer. Since 1999 the Pampers brand has been airing the region's first-ever serialised ad campaign, an immensely popular ongoing stream of episodes telling the story of the lives of a young Saudi family (it's the Gold Blend advertising of the Arab world).

Saudi Arabia is indicative. Products are manufactured locally and most of workforce and management are Saudis. Many grassroots initiatives have been taken: between Pampers and the Saudi Paediatric Association; Crest and The Ministry of Health; Tide is sponsoring a Science Park in the Kingdom. All are foundations on which to build love and respect locally with consumers.

Commentators believe respect will win Arab minds and hearts. But respect isn't enough. Brands have to love their local markets everywhere – and show it. This is the opportunity and my vision for the west in the Middle East. Respect may get you into the *mudhif*. Only love makes you part of the family. Only love creates loyalty beyond reason.

Kevin Roberts is CEO worldwide of Saatchi & Saatchi
www.saatchikevin.com