



Ten Simple Tips for Culturally Competent Ads

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1. **Start with the right people in the room.** If you want to run a culturally competent ad campaign, make sure there is diversity at all levels of the process from conception to roll-out. Don't just bring in "diverse" opinions after the fact, after expending a lot of resources. Stop a train before it gains too much momentum.
2. **Remember, images are worth a thousand words.** Yes, it is cliché, but the images you choose are just as important as the script you write. You proofread, copyedit, and spell check the written words over and over again in the process. Why not do the same with images that are worth a thousand of them.
3. **Test.** Take the time to set up diverse focus groups. Think beyond surface level diversity. Depending on your target market, consider focus groups that involve people of differing ages, physical abilities, socioeconomic statuses, political backgrounds, etc.
4. **Run the numbers.** Does it make sense to pay attention to diversity? Can you afford not to pay attention? Check out this article by Sarah Blahovec: [Why Hire Disabled Workers? 4 Powerful \(and Inclusive\) Companies Answer](#)
5. **Get the lighting right.** Having the right people in the room even applies at the technician level. Simple items such as backdrops, apparel, props, and lighting can easily create pitfalls for those that have not worked in diverse environments. [Dark skin tones](#) and lighter skin tones show up differently in print and need different lighting. The wrong prop in the background can suggest cultural appropriation or [enforce a racial stereotype](#).
6. **Ladies first or at least 50%.** Gender diversity should be an easy one. If you have an all-male team, you are going to miss something. If you care about the LGBTQ market, realize that diverse teamwork makes the dream work. (see tip #1)
7. **Remember that E=MC².** Information and electronic ads literally move at the speed of light. In seconds, you can be [Kohls and Chewbacca mom](#), or you can be [Pepsi and Kendall Jenner a failed ad campaign](#). Don't go viral because of cultural and historical incompetence. As we all know, "The internet has no chill."
8. **Don't forget power matters.** When ads reinforce perceived power injustices, the intended message gets lost. Ask yourself does this ad pit male against female; white against black; the physically strong against the physically challenged; the physically thin against the physically thick? Those that are not a part of the dominant culture don't need your product placement bringing them down.
9. **Think globally.** If you are a global brand, understand that both culture and context matter. What may be funny in Denmark might cause great harm in Dallas, Texas or Timbuktu. (see tip #7)
10. **I'm sorry goes a long way.** In the end, if you mess up, people will forgive you, especially if you have a good product. Say, "I'm sorry" as quickly as possible and pull the ad. Now there may be other steps that need to happen depending on the magnitude of the gaffe, but don't try to justify or minimize the mistake. Apologize and make it right.