

THE INVERTED TRIANGLE DILEMMA

Understanding Differences in LATAM and U.S. Communication Styles Can Help Improve Hispanic Marketing Practices

A POV BY  AHZUL

Is language an extension of culture? And does language influence culture?

Most would answer yes to both. And in the business world (where English is the most commonly used language), there is much room for improvement in communications between people of Latin American backgrounds and those born and raised in the U.S.

The Inverted Triangle Dilemma examines how to be persuasive with consumers of both backgrounds. Using a common language is simply not enough; the way an argument is constructed can influence everything from brand choice, frequency of purchase, store preference, and other key attitudes and behaviors.

A basic illustration:

“Why did we have increased sales last quarter?”

U.S.-style answer

“We had increased sales last quarter because of an uptick in consumer demand in Colombia and Mexico. This is perhaps due to the fact that we launched our new advertising campaign in these two countries.”



Latin American-style answer

“Two years ago we reached out to our ad agency and mentioned we were worried about weak sales. Based on that concern, we put together a new campaign that was launched last quarter. The campaign was really exciting and innovative. People loved it. So, that’s probably why we had an increase in sales last quarter.”

American culture and language as an upright triangle

Americans tend to immediately address the question to then work down from it and explain the reasoning behind the answer. They expect the point to be revealed upfront followed by supporting arguments.

Latin American culture and language as an inverted triangle

Latin Americans deal with questions in a totally different way. First, they give the arguments that support their case to build anticipation for their point, which is made much later in their argument.

LANGUAGE ISSUE?

This is not merely a language issue. It is actually the result of what each culture considers to be most persuasive, which in turn, is a reflection of their worldview and values.



U.S.

In the U.S., clarity, efficiency & precision are highly valued. As a result, the answer or conclusion (i.e. the point) tends to lead persuasive arguments.



LATIN AMERICA

In Latin America, context, storytelling & “color” are highly valued. This explains the set-up required to reach a satisfying conclusion or punch line (i.e. building up to reach the point).

THE DISCONNECTS

AMERICANS

Think they are getting “spin” or evasive responses. In many cases, they lose interest before the point is reached.



Think they are getting a cut throat attitude, that comes across as “short,” “rude” or unnecessarily aggressive.

LATIN AMERICANS

THE IMPLICATIONS

THIS “DILEMMA” IMPACTS COMMUNICATIONS BEYOND LATIN AMERICA; IT EXTENDS TO

U.S. HISPANICS

(especially the lesser acculturated)

U.S. Hispanics, particularly the lesser acculturated, remain closely tied to their native culture, language and speech patterns. As a result, in communicating with them, it is important to bear in mind their preference for context, color & storytelling - as opposed to over efficient and to-the-point interactions. As the marketplace evolves to include more cross-cultural interactions with consumers (as well as team members, colleagues and clients), understanding this dilemma could help U.S. marketers (and other professionals) to understand the nuances and to create more effective communications without getting “Lost in Translation.”

In the same vein, Hispanics who arrive in the U.S. hoping to truly “get” American culture (or Latin American professionals who seek to build relationships with U.S. clients or colleagues) should keep in mind that clarity, efficiency and precision are essential in this neck of the woods and should tailor their messages accordingly.

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