

Creating the right space in new markets

Four IV has seen many of its long-term clients take the leap from strong local players to major international brands. Here, the design group's co-founders Chris Dewar-Dixon and Andrew Bone discuss the importance of tailoring a retail experience to the local market.



When taking their brand international, clients rightly want to ensure that the quality of the retail or leisure experience is consistent, from the look and feel of the interior to the behaviour of staff. However, consistency does not mean ignoring a number of very important factors that will and should influence how you present your brand in the international context.

The culture of the society you are looking to address should play a role on a number of levels. In terms of design, accommodating social norms can involve layout of bathrooms and changing rooms to full separation of men and women to care over imagery, accessories and prints. Different perspectives of luxury can mean that on the one hand, what looks expensive and minimalist to one culture may look cheap to another. On the other hand, lots of ostentatious gold decoration may to a Western eye look tacky, but to other markets will be seen as extremely sophisticated.

Many global brands make use of their special national characteristics wherever

they go. IKEA is Swedish through and through – from its design ethic to the meatballs that are served in the canteen. Paul Smith is British tailoring with a hint of the British eccentric. Its stores echo the traditional and eccentric feel of its Floral Street home – wood panelling, floral designs and the odd unexpected display items such as robots, a storybook or the odd shoe. Muji is Japanese minimalism coupled with good design. Its name even means “no brand”. It is seen as cheap and cheerful in Japan but has a very different positioning in the UK.

These brands build in the aspects of their country that are already associated with them around the world. They play up to stereotype but leave behind the negatives. They have managed to export a distinctly national brand that is relevant to an international market.

Building on this brand strategy, the store you roll out must retain a common denominator – something that provides consistency but will be tailored to the local market. This cannot be done unless you have a regular presence on the ground, understanding the culture, gaining inspiration from how people dress, interact and live and making a judgement about what will help your client bring people into the store and turn their interest into sales. Mamas & Papas achieved this by working with a local franchise group with a fantastic track record of bringing brands to the Middle East. Harvey Nichols did this by

completely going against the grain of common stereotypes about Istanbul's residents, who are in fact some of the most stylish and fashion-aware in the world. They knew that and the store reflected that knowledge – Harvey Nichols Istanbul is, as a result, a great success.

This local understanding can be developed in a number of ways, from opening local offices to working with local firms. The local presence has its advantages but also removes designers from their own and their clients' core business and markets, and there is always a risk of design becoming too local and losing the global perspective. Remaining an international firm with a strong base and a network of experienced local firms allows a design group to successfully implement a design concept without losing sight of the bigger picture.

We have found that an element of surprise, of going against the grain, within the limits of cultural sensitivity and taste, has been key to the success of a new space. Don't be afraid to experiment, to take a risk, to try something new. Limited impressions of cultures can often limit our designs. We have found people surprising in their taste and love of the new all over the world, from the Middle East to China.

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