In Your Face: How American Marketing Excesses Fuels Anti-Americanism

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How have aggressive marketing approaches by American firms affected anti-American feelings worldwide is the focus of this interesting, introspective and timely book by Johansson, a Professor of Marketing and International Business at Georgetown University. The authors’ perspective is particularly interesting given that he uses multiples “lenses” in investigating the issue- he is a native of Sweden, yet having lived and worked mostly in the United States as well as for almost a dozen major firms and institutions globally.

The book begins with the authors’ own metamorphosis from being a pro-globalizer, “believing in the essential of free trade and open access to foreign markets” to one challenging some of the same assertions in the twenty-first century. His transformation is fueled by the “three strikes,” namely, anti-marketing, because of the pervasive growth and irresponsible marketing strategies of major firms, anti-globalization, primarily driven by Klein’s (2002) attack on predatory free trade and domineering global brands and anti-Americanism abroad, resulting from insensitive political actions.

A case is then developed for how less marketing can be more effective, how to draw the boundaries for ethical marketing practices, why global marketing in general is bad marketing and how global localization is the wave of the future. Global marketers are particularly advised against a “one size fits all” formula of ethnocentric marketing policies both at home and abroad. Overall, he is sharply critical of the “good marketing is good marketing everywhere” mantra, which he feels had pervaded not only in American business school curriculums, but reflected in peer-reviewed journals as well.

The book also critically analyzes why American brands are more susceptible to being targeted and the overt connection between marketing and foreign policy. He preaches a new path to sustainable profits- one based on respect for foreign markets, not dominance. The Japanese case is contrasted as one whose brands are not disparaged primarily because of their low “bullying quotient,” their emphasis on “zero defects” vs. “it works” quality philosophy, as well as their way of adapting a product’s design to a foreign market. The European brands, on the other hand, are belittled in cases when the product categories are similar to the Americans, e.g., athletic shoes, leisure apparel, and beverages, and when they mimic their marketing strategies such as outsourcing, poor labor practices and wages, inner city “exploitation” and campus sponsorship activities.

The final two chapters focus on whether or not other countries are any better and recommendations for the future, which primarily hinges on American marketers being more sensitive and adaptive to foreign markets.

The author blends a fine balance between general observations and personal experience in developing his critical insights and arguments that make the book a great read. Despite being a
leading authority on the subject, he chooses a conversational introspective approach in addressing these issues rather than lecturing us from a pulpit. Many of the issues are raised more as questions rather than stated as assertive statements, such as: Why is the anti-globalization movement so focused on American brands? Are foreign brands any better or does it have to do with how they are marketed? What lessons can be learned to develop “good global marketing”?

One of the ways that might have strengthened his arguments was to have included more empirical data supporting his conjectures. There are a couple of Tables in Chapter 1 (on pages 18 & 19) illustrating the precipitous drop in favorableness toward the U.S. by major European countries between 2002 and 2003, and vice versa. How has such perceptions changed in the rest of the world, and how does it vary by brand? Are there countrywide or regional differences in such perceptions? Stewart-Allen (2002) illustrates how such negative feelings towards the US are stronger in Europe than the rest of the world, primarily because of the NATO alliance, which causes them to feel highly dependent and more threatened.

Are such feelings pervasive in other parts of the globe, particularly where American brands have recently entered these markets? On a personal note, when I recently asked my niece, who lives in India, how she was going to spend the prize money that she had won in a competition, she promptly responded that she would love to eat at the local McDonalds!

Three databases are worth noting for providing concrete empirical evidence of such trends. First, the GMI Poll, http://www.gmi-mr.com, contains 200 country panels, with operations in five continents. For example, recent results from this database do show that significant South Asian Tsunami relief efforts mounted by major US firms such as Coca Cola, Starbucks and Microsoft have marginally improved the world’s image of their brands. A second database that will aid in further empirical investigation of world opinion is the World Values Survey, http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/. This survey focuses on socio-cultural and political change and is conducted in almost 80 countries- four waves of data have been collected so far since 1981. Finally, the Edelman Trust Barometer, http://www.edelman.com/, annually tracks the attitudes of 1,500 opinion leaders from six major countries about what global firms and institutions they trust the most and why. Interestingly, in the last two years, i.e., 2004 and 2005, the data echoes the authors’ sentiments of distrust of US firms by European (and even Canadian executives) primarily because of the formers’ foreign policy as well as her culture and values. Consumers in Brazil, China, and some other countries in Asia, however, had a greater level of trust in US firms, viewed their cultures positively and were more likely to purchase their products.

Readers interested in these issues are advised to read a similar book by Anholt (2005) related to this matter. He traces back the history of “Brand America” to Benjamin Franklin’s visit to Europe and shows how America shapes the world by becoming the largest and most powerful brand in the global marketplace. He too alludes to the recent declining brand images of US based firms. Equally intriguing is Friedman’s (2005) thesis that the twenty-first century will be characterized by a “flat world” where no country will have dominance in the marketplace, and that the globalization process is likely to be driven more “by a much more diverse-non-Western, non-white –group of individuals.” How relevant will “in your face” marketing strategies be under such circumstances? Are anti-marketing, anti-globalization, and anti-Americanism likely to be exacerbated or alleviated under such conditions?

Overall, “In Your Face” is an honest, thought provoking, and compelling book that will not only appeal to students of International Business but to civic and political leaders and average citizens as well. The authors’ extensive scholarship, his eyes for personal detail coupled with his careful critical analysis makes this a remarkable book. I highly recommend it.

References

