

GERMAN VALUES IN ADVERTISING TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE FALL OF THE WALL: AN INSPECTION

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ABSTRACT

On October 3, 2009, Germany celebrated twenty years of reunification. However, Germany is all but a unified country. Research shows that even after 20 years Germany is still economically and emotionally divided (Waldermann, 2009). For the advertising world, reunification in 1989 meant that from one day to the next, Germany had grown from 63 million consumers in former West Germany to a combined 80 million consumers (Jung, 1999). Reunification made Germany the largest market in the European Union as well as the most powerful economy. Understanding the German value mix twenty years after reunification of former East and West Germany is important as global marketers are still struggling to appeal to a “German-German” market. The German advertising industry is the largest in continental Europe and expected to grow 11.3% by 2012, thus representing tremendous opportunity for growth (Datamonitor, 2008). Most marketers and advertisers saw tremendous growth opportunities in the unsaturated markets in former East Germany but failed to realize that these consumers had a completely different mindset than consumers in West Germany (Mackat, 2007). Although research has shown the extent to which German culture has changed after reunification (Mackat, 2007; Feik & Gierl, 1996; Johnson & Johnson, 1993), no research currently exists that describes the German value structure in former East and former West Germany with respect to advertising practices.

The purpose of this study was to explore how cultural values are expressed in advertising in former East and West Germany from the perspective of advertising executives who worked in the German advertising industry before and after reunification. Three theories provided a conceptual framework for the study that also informed the research questions, including generational cohort theory (Inglehardt, 1977), social constructivist theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and acculturation theory (Padilla & Perez, 2003). The German-German market had not been studied since 1996 (Feick & Gierl), so an exploratory, qualitative investigation was needed to determine whether the value mix of reunified Germany as changed after 20 years of reunification from the perspective of German advertising executives.

The pilot study of five German advertising executives representing small and large advertising agencies revealed that most of the agencies viewed and continue to view the East German market as an “appendix” of 17 million consumers to the former West German market. Even directly after the fall of the Wall the majority of the agencies the executives were representing did not engage in any significant market research to determine how to appeal to former East German consumers who held a completely different set of values after having lived under socialist rule for forty years. They simply “folded” former East Germany into existing advertising campaigns for a variety of clients, using typical Western/modern values to appeal to the newly formed German-German market. They indicate that they did not expect as much success from the East German market because it included fewer consumers than West Germany with lower purchasing power. They assumed that advertising appeals used in the West

would work equally well in the former East because those consumers wanted to have access to Western goods and services. The five pilot interviews revealed that the executives representing larger agencies were almost irritated by the questions about cultural differences in former East and West Germany as expressed in addressed by advertising. Only one of the participants, an executive from a small agency that specializes in German-German value differences, provided in-depth insights into the German-German market.

The results of this study indicate that, from the perspective of an advertising executive who specializes in German-German value differences, the value mix has changed but not in a way that most advertising executives had predicted in the early 1990s. One theme that emerged in regard to political and historical issues affecting value differences was that for the most part German advertising still appears to be influenced by politics. The division of the country resulted in severe insecurities among most Germans in terms of accepting one another's differences and addressing them in advertising. In terms of social issues affecting cultural differences between former East and West Germans, an alarming emerging theme was that advertising executives use dysfunctional stereotypes when talking about former East Germany and current eastern portions of the German market. These two themes support acculturation theory (Padilla & Perez, 2003), suggesting that members of a host group (in this case former West Germany) may find it difficult to get to know the newcomers (former East Germans) and exhibit a stereotypical view of them. Another theme that emerged addressed cultural value differences displayed in advertising. It appears that collectivistic and individualistic values are in the process of converging. Social constructivist theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1977) suggests that reality is socially constructed by individuals and groups in a dynamic process. The findings of this study show that individuals and groups who share the same cultural background respond better to realities that are shown in advertising. Since former West Germany was an individualistic culture, advertising appeals such as success and achievement were used. These values, however, did not appeal to former East German consumers, who had a collectivistic cultural makeup. This study shows that both cultural dimensions are slowly converging. In fact, the main theme that emerged from this study was that East German advertising is effective in the entire German-German market. In other words, messages that are created for an East German audience will also work for a West German audience. Those values include an emphasis on tradition, solidarity, private life, and security.

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