



A CULTURAL CONNECTION

How brands go beyond their borders with a global-local approach

WORDS **Lucy Handley**

COVER / GLOBAL EXPANSION

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Can global brands enter new markets without 'lift and shift', balancing consistency with local cultural relevance?

It's a fundamental question for design agency Elmwood and its clients, according to Polly Hopkins, the agency's UK managing director and head of corporate growth. "We're always dealing with a global team and local markets at the same time," she says.

"Challenges come up where we treat consistency and localisation as opposites,



Above Starbucks opened its first store in mainland China in 1999 and balances its brand with local culture

whereas they're not – they're interdependent. The most effective global brands we work with operate very much on the idea of 'fixed and flex', balancing core standards with local adaptation," Hopkins adds.

Elmwood advises clients to define the non-negotiables that remain the same every time their brand enters a new market or launches a campaign. These fixed assets include brand identity and how you show up visually.



Above Hard Rock runs an annual World Burger Tour competition as part of its commitment to celebrating parts of the world through food

She gives the example of Starbucks' entry into mainland China, back in 1999. "It wasn't like shipping in an American café experience, it was saying, OK, what is a social situation that people want to be taking coffee in? How can we learn from tea [culture]?" When Starbucks was founded, it aimed to be a 'third space' between work and home, and the idea continues to be used in China.

In September, Starbucks China partnered with Xiaohongshu, the Little Red Book app, to

position 1,800 stores as 'interest-based community spaces', with hobbies including cycling and crafting catered for. Starbucks says it has "a diverse range of third spaces across the country; none of these stores is simply copied and pasted".

A 'CONSTANT' TEMPTATION

For David Hampian, a former global head of audience development at Amazon, the temptation to 'lift and shift' marketing for entertainment brands in the US was constant when scaling campaign programmes internationally. The brands able to resist that mindset outperformed, he says. "The framework needs to travel, not the execution. You want to export some strategy and best practices but let local teams use their own creative expression and activation."

For example, holiday campaigns for Amazon's entertainment brands – such as Twitch and Amazon Music – had a video-first approach on the Meta platform, with a strong hook in the first three seconds. That worked well in the US, but in Europe it "tanked",

Hampian says. Static images outperform video in the region, Amazon found.

Hampian, now a fractional CMO, previously worked for Hard Rock International, where his remit was to help the brand evolve from a legacy brand into a digital business. "Here's a brand with enormous heritage and global recognition, but the risk was over-relying on that nostalgia rather than adapting," Hampian's team had to protect the brand's DNA, while letting individual markets shape how that DNA showed up," he says.

When a brand goes to a new territory, it's important to have both a great central team and good people in the new market, says Michael Pring, global client and development

THE FRAMEWORK NEEDS TO TRAVEL, NOT THE EXECUTION

David Hampian, fractional CMO



A&O HOSTELS

When Oliver Winter was a student back in the 1990s, he was on his way to becoming a teacher. But after travelling the world during a break from studying, he returned to his home country, Germany, and came up with an idea. Could he open a hostel that anyone could stay in, without the association membership that was the way hostels operated at that time?

Fast-forward to 2000, and a&o opened its first property in Berlin-Friedrichshain, expanding into Prague in 2005. Properties in Austria, Italy, Denmark, Hungary and Poland followed, and in 2024, the company announced it would spend €500m (about £436m) on expansion.

“One of the key learnings from expanding beyond our home market was the importance of balancing standardisation with flexibility,” Winter tells *Catalyst*. “Our model is built around reliable, modern, affordable accommodation in central European cities, but each location must still reflect its surroundings,” he says.

“Our mission has always been simple: we want everyone to travel. Travel is about exchange, openness and discovering new cultures. Travel does not stop at borders and it should not be limited by budget,” Winter says.

a&o Hostels are often in converted offices or commercial properties. “Our Budapest property is housed in a former playing card factory; in Leipzig, we transformed a former post office; and in London, we revitalised a historic 17th-century port building,” Winter says. “Retaining these histories allows us to embed ourselves into the local fabric while maintaining the a&o brand standard.”



CHALLENGES COME UP WHERE WE TREAT CONSISTENCY AND LOCALISATION AS OPPOSITES, WHEREAS THEY'RE ACTUALLY NOT - THEY ARE INTERDEPENDENT

Polly Hopkins, UK managing director at Elmwood



director at live agency Verve. “Global teams have evolved. They know they can’t just sit and approve and not approve things. They must partner with markets to develop things together,” he says.

He advocates that brands entering new markets “look for what unites people” and says that doing so helps them reach “deeper human themes that are actually quite universal”. Pring praises Nike’s adaptation to cultural nuances while retaining its global brand appeal.



Above Design agency Elmwood worked with Coca-Cola in Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia on packaging using cultural symbols to create a festive Lunar New Year identity, inspired by traditional embroidery patterns

Coca-Cola is a classic example of this, with the brand standing for “celebration, togetherness and joy”, says Hopkins at Elmwood. This is something the agency brought to life for Coke’s Lunar New Year packaging design. Elmwood worked with Coca-Cola’s teams in

Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia to design cans, packaging, retail displays and digital platforms that used cultural symbols to create a festive identity. Designs were inspired by traditional embroidery patterns relevant to each country.

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Michael Pring, global client and development director, Verve

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LUXURY EXPANSION

Luxury brands often talk about their ‘codes’, which help them have a sense of exclusivity. For high-end hotel company EDITION, those codes are more about how the brand makes guests feel than how the properties look, with a focus on being “unexpected and refreshing”, according to the company. Indeed, it calls itself the “anti-hotel chain”, and operates hotels in countries including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Japan and the US.

Meanwhile, Capella Hotel Group’s expansion into Japan last year was carefully executed, according to Clive Edwards, its senior vice president of operations. “Japan has long been a destination we have deeply admired, and

we have been intentional about introducing our brands here,” Edwards says.

The company, based in Singapore, is rapidly expanding and last year hired former Six Senses CEO Neil Jacobs as a strategic adviser to help manage this growth. Jacobs talks about Capella as building hotels “that are true expressions of their destinations”.

Capella Kyoto – the hotel group’s second property in Japan – opened in March 2026, and guests will be able to see traditional geisha performances or visit a 150-year-old sandal atelier, where they can commission a bespoke pair of shoes. Some of these experiences are rarely open to visitors, the hotel company says.



Above Capella Hotel Group builds hotels “that are true expressions of their destinations”



Above UK-based Pavegen is a 'smart' floor tile that turns footsteps into electricity and adapts marketing for each country, says founder Laurence Kemball-Cook

SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS

For UK entrepreneur and inventor Laurence Kemball-Cook, expanding into new geographies wasn't about researching product-market fit or spending time analysing the target audience. Instead, his

product, Pavegen – a 'smart' floor tile that converts the weight of human footsteps into electricity – went viral, and he found himself travelling all over the world as a result. "One minute, I'm in Brazil with Pele powering a soccer pitch using the power of footsteps, and

then I'm working with Nike at a stadium in Korea," Kemball-Cook says.

Early interest in Pavegen was part of the hype cycle, he says, and now the company's strategy is more about mass adoption. A particular focus for expansion is the Middle East, where customers are open to more distinctive branding than in the UK. When Pavegen exhibits at trade shows, he says, "Some of my design team will put forward a design, and I'd say no, guys, bigger is better – bigger logo, get the brand out there."

How the brand shows up visually is important, but marketing successfully in different countries often comes down to understanding business culture. In Saudi Arabia, Kemball-Cook says relationships are key, so the focus of communications is on his story as a founder, which might show up as a day-in-the-life video on TikTok, for example. In Saudi Arabia, platforms such as LinkedIn also feel 'fresher', and the brand found visitors mentioned its sponsored posts at Riyadh's Cityscape property conference.

At Mega Events, a company that creates, produces and promotes live entertainment, the focus is on ensuring a show concept scales internationally. One of the company's shows, The Rock Orchestra, is a collective of classical musicians who perform well-known rock and metal tracks. More than 500,000 people have seen the show in the UK, Europe and the US over the past four years, and it has broad appeal because of its wide audience – people aged 35 to 70 attend performances, says Mega Events director Nathan Reed.

The company bases new show concepts on a “constellation of data points”, according to Reed, testing ideas online and moving forward only with those that have high demand. “What we’re looking for is ultra-high intent at an ultra-low marketing spend.”

Some shows haven't travelled so well, such as the Illuminated Orchestra, which performs famous film scores in theatres and cathedrals around the UK and Europe. When the Illuminated Orchestra went to the US to perform music from John Williams' Harry



Above The Rock Orchestra is one show that has proved to travel well across markets

Potter score, it didn't work because the film's official live show was also on tour. “For us coming with a smaller tribute version, the market wasn't there,” Reed says.

With the world now so hyper-connected, marketers on a mission to expand across geographies may have their work cut out.

Lucy Handley is editor-at-large of *Catalyst*