

Locating the big Russian soul

Aaron Shields discovers the Russians' flamboyant nature is largely misunderstood, and even patronised, by marketers in the West. Western brands, particularly FMCGs, should take heed

Growing up in Canada, I had the impression that Russians are cold, stoic beings in non-descript, uncomfortable clothes, who have serious conversations in dimly lit cafes. Nothing could be further from the truth.

If you need a reference, Italian culture is probably more useful than any other. The Russian people have had a close relationship with both the Italians and the French for hundreds of years. Italian architects designed the Kremlin and most Russian cities are littered with Baroque and Beaux Arts-influenced buildings. It's not just the buildings that are glitzy Russians themselves have a flamboyant style in everything from the way they dress to the way they hold-court in conversations with friends. This flamboyancy is often referred to as 'The Big Russian Soul'.

Shiny happy people

International marketers have been slow to exploit this characteristic of the Russian psyche. Instead, they have depended on the 'not-from-here' notions of appeal and superior quality of international brands to drive their share into the market. The Italians, by contrast, have been quick to recognise the market's character. Brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, Versace, Valentino and Hugo Boss reign supreme in Russia. The more glam and glitter, the better and it seems that the newly liberated market cannot get enough.

Slick, minimalist, international brands have their place in Russia, but they are chiefly consumed by a small number of the elite in Moscow and St. Petersburg. We need to contrast this small 'minimalist' niche against every Russian youth owning a drawer-full of



Glam and glitz reigns in Russia – brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, Versace and Valentino are touching the aspirational Russian consumer

the most 'maximalist' D&G t-shirts that can be found on the black market. With this in mind, it is time to take a page from Italian marketing books and capitalise on the Dolce Vita aspects of Russian living.

The larger-than-life image changes from brand to brand, but the flamboyant lifestyle is parodied in successful communications. Of course, there is a risk. We need to be cautious with the difference between exaggerating life with a bit of theatre, and making any illusions that is actually how life is or should be.

Contrast this with British or American promotions that use consumers' more successful peers to try to push people's perception of what they should want. Most ad agencies are pumping in best practice from Anglo-Saxon markets and finding that the approach simply does not fit the Russian context.

As a result, marketers have been adopting this aspirational peer approach

with an ever-decreasing level of success in Russia.

Western-like capitalism and Italian-like ostentation combine best in Moscow for a less-than-subtle effect. Here, brands are everywhere and billboards are crammed into every conceivable view. Even the area around the Kremlin is wallpapered with gigantic billboards costing a million dollars a week and featuring brands like Rolex and Versace.

Russia is also a land of contrasts and while the Dolce Vita may be the ideal, the real picture is a little less sweet. There is a tremendous amount of wealth in Moscow, but your average Muscovite earns \$750 (£381) per month. Moscow recently topped the list as the most expensive global city to live in last year, so this wage gives an indication for how far the market has yet to develop for everyone.

The urban/rural divide

It's important not to dismiss the Russian urban/rural divide as something that occurs in every market to a similar degree. The gap is more extreme in Russia, looking more like the gap between urban and rural customers in Asia than in other parts of Eastern Europe.

City-dwellers in Moscow and St. Petersburg dream of vacations abroad and lifestyles that are more akin to Western European standards. Rural households dream of buying new winter clothes for their children or purchasing their first mobile phone through systems similar to micro-credits first developed in India, which allow poor consumers small loans to buy necessities.

So, on one hand, we have the Big Russian Soul craving a bit of ostentation and on the other, we have the constraints of

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a newly capitalised economy that is still living with extremes (and will do for decades to come). This situation presents interesting dilemmas for marketers – especially for mass-market brands such as FMCG, banks and telecoms.

As you can imagine, it is easy to intimidate someone earning \$200 (£101) per month with visions of the good life that would make your typical middle-class Russian recoil and yawn. Promoting values that relate to social recognition, respect and achievement are tricky when promoting to the masses in Russia.

Targeting the right audience

Banks and telecoms have had an especially hard time in getting their promotions right since messages of achievement are easy pickings in other countries and they are going on best practice. When they promote achievement-focused messages, they alienate the poor as they are overly aspirational and they alienate the wealthy middle class because they are hopelessly dull.

The problem is one of specificity and relating the function of a product to the aspirational values that you want to promote. While fashion brands can make you feel like you are walking down a runway in Milan, yogurt cannot help you become more popular with your friends.

This situation is true to some degree in all markets, but it is exaggerated in Russia. For example, if a mobile phone brand promotes notions of international



Brands must appeal to the growing middle class without alienating the less well-off

travel to the market in order to promote a new roaming tariff, they will intimidate the vast majority of customers. Or if a vodka brand promotes people drinking at a trendy bar, many consumers feel alienated.

Marketers need to exercise caution with the specificity of marketing message in Russia as it relates to the product that they are marketing. If a product is naturally glamorous, then notions of a generally glamorous lifestyle will work wonders. However, if the product is not directly related to glamour – like a bank account or a soda drink – then presenting an aspirational lifestyle can be risky

Transparency

The extent to which Russians reject insincere marketing messages is severe. After 70 years of communism, Russians know a bit of propaganda when they see it. To date, the desire to grow brand awareness across the country has masked the need for more effort in differentiating brands. But the awareness-growing gold-rush is now coming to an end. Marketing requirements are moving towards preference building so market cynicism will make the going increasingly tough.

The profession has recognised this cynicism and has been trying to define what aspects of Russian culture, values and norms will be acceptable for the mass market. Ironically, these have culminated in a resurgence of Russian nationalism communicated to the markets through brands. Major brands from beer to banks to telecoms are espousing nationalistic messages and trying to capture the essence of that Big Russian Soul.

MTS, the largest telecom company with more than 70 million subscribers, recently relaunched the brand and capitalised on the Big Russian Soul in the process. It uses authentic images of Russian people portraying daily life situations in a way that profiles Russian living and

what it means to be Russian. Further, MTS congratulates the country in advertising spots that celebrate national holidays and other significant occasions.

Other brands, such as Baltika, are trying to leverage the Russian love of all things cheeky. Black humour is popular, and for all their suffering Russians know how to laugh at the darker side of life. Still, this levity needs to be tempered with caution around social norms. Unbelievably, your average Russian young person feels little need to stand out from the crowd and poke fun at anything too specific. Specifically, being irreverent as a whole social group is fine, but being irreverent as an individual is taboo.

The people's paradox

There are many conceptions and misconceptions about Russia as a land and the Russian people. People looking from the outside-in have formed their opinions of the motherland from propaganda promoted during the Cold War and often approach the market with a 'father knows best' attitude. People looking from the inside are looking outside for the answers since they realise that there is so much to learn about the science of branding.

In the end, what's obvious is that marketers need to look much harder to the inside of the culture in order to get it right and to figure out the paradoxes that make Russians tick. Companies need to become more sophisticated with the messages they promote in Russia. Nationalism serves as a good stop-gap for some of the major brands, but is not appropriate for every situation and will soon live out its course. We need to do more work in order to plug into the local psyche and unpick the critical, cultured and sophisticated nature of the Russian mind before we can build truly great brands for the country. ■

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