

Culture in communications

I just finished reading Malcolm Gladwell's very insightful *Outliers*. I recommend it if you want to think about success as being a meeting of opportunity, chance and ability. And, my friend and colleague Daria Steigman just posted a question about culture in social media on her blog, *Independent Thinking*.

Daria wants to know if culture affects communication. *Outliers* can answer this question. Without a doubt, the answer is yes. In *Outliers*, Gladwell talks about the Avianca plane crash a few years ago on Long Island, NY. The plane crashed because it had run out of fuel after circling for hours due to bad weather in the area. Gladwell thinks that if the culture of the first officer flying the plane had allowed him to be less deferential toward the JFK control tower, he would have been able to make an emergency landing at Kennedy. Instead, he was not forceful in telling the tower that the plane was dangerously low on fuel. I highly recommend you read the book to fully understand this concept.

Suffice it to say that different cultures expect different communications from different people. Some cultures are more hierarchical and others less so. Some are more cooperative. Some are more focused on results. Whatever the differences are, any communications messages must reflect these nuances.

In Spanish, for instance, there is a difference between the more familiar "tu" and the more formal "usted." In certain Spanish-speaking countries, everyone uses tu and it is considered old-fashioned to use usted. In other countries, if you don't know someone, you automatically use usted. Clearly, an ad written in one of the pronouns that doesn't take into consideration the norm of the country may insult or offend or not reach its intended audience.

Culture matters in communications. A good communicator always knows his or her target audience, and one of the most important qualifiers to that target is culture.