



The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: the best and worst of localisation for the automotive sector

Thought piece

ALPHA LTD

St Andrew's House
St Andrew's Road
Cambridge CB4 1DL
United Kingdom

[@thisisalphalive](#)

[thisisalpha.com](#)

In 1965, the British luxury car manufacturer Rolls Royce was on the verge of launching a gleaming new flagship model: the Silver Mist. In keeping with its exclusive brand image, the name exuded an aura of regal elegance and timeless sophistication designed to appeal to well-heeled car lovers the world over.

Except, to German ears, it sounded rather less poetic than it did to its Anglophone creators. Because, in German, "Mist" means, quite simply, "manure". Thankfully, someone at Rolls Royce with an understanding of Teutonic agricultural terms pointed out the potential gaffe just in time; a new name was quickly adopted before any damage was done. So it was that the iconic Silver Shadow was born and a steaming mess of embarrassing sales pitches was avoided at dealership showrooms from Munich to Mainz.

In the automotive sector, as we have just seen, a failure to localise effectively across different markets can potentially create a stink that's hard to clear. On the other hand, some automotive manufacturers have understood the value of a message tailor made for different regional and cultural audiences.

So we invite you to join us on a whistle-stop tour through the Wild West of localisation for the automotive sector. This action-packed road trip takes in some of the regionally inspired highlights alongside some infamous fails. Grab your Stetson and settle in for the ride: here we present the Good, the Bad and the Ugly of automotive localisation.

The Good

Volkswagen: getting personal

In markets around the world, Volkswagen has used the classic strapline "Das Auto" to great effect. The original German is easily understandable by non-native audiences, but helps to emphasise the pedigree of one of the world's most trusted car manufacturers. However, as Volkswagen soon realised, not all audiences share this perception.

When this strapline was introduced to Brazil – a major manufacturing centre for the Beetle – locals felt hurt and betrayed by a brand they treated as an "honorary Brazilian", a part of their own cultural heritage. Volkswagen therefore adapted the strapline into the Portuguese "Você conhece, Você confia" or "You know, you trust" – re-establishing a much more personal connection with its Brazilian audience. While initially missing the mark, we think round two was a bullseye hit for the German brand with a special place in Brazilian hearts.

BMW: local favourites

Since 1969, car manufacturer BMW has used the phrase "Freude am Fahren" as its key slogan for its homegrown German audiences. Alliterative, snappy and now completely synonymous with the brand in this market, the phrase has stood the test of time and still appears in [some of BMW's latest TV spots](#).

But what exactly does it mean? Translated into English, the slogan could be phrased as "Pleasure in driving" or perhaps "The joy of driving". But, lacking the catchy punch of the German original, BMW thought long and hard about how to localise its key slogan for the car-loving American public. The result? The strapline "The Ultimate Driving Machine" was first used in US TV ads in 1973, and has remained a staple of its advertising across English-speaking markets ever since. For an aspirational brand, this savvy piece of localisation has paid off handsomely.

The Bad

Kia: sparking controversy in Northern Ireland

In 2013, the Korean car manufacturer Kia was excited to showcase a brand new concept model at the prestigious Geneva Motor Show. Named the Provo, this sporty city-model was designed to rival the Mini, but some visitors to the stand were quick to point out a rather serious cultural gaffe. Because in the UK, the term “Provo” is a shorthand way of referring to the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Irish republican paramilitary organization that was involved in a bloody armed struggle and sectarian violence between 1969 and 1997 aimed at securing Northern Ireland’s independence from Britain.

Across the UK, the name has hugely sensitive cultural connotations and Kia swiftly issued a statement that there had been “absolutely no intention to cause offence”. Although it was too late to save the red-faced manufacturer from embarrassment at the Geneva Motor Show, Kia had to work hard to quell a PR disaster and assure UK audiences that the unfortunate name would not be used on a production model. Ironically, Kia had described this particular design concept as “a radical super-mini coupe which aims to set the streets alight”. In this instance, a little localisation forethought would have gone a long way.

Volkswagen: shades of interpretation

In 2012, Volkswagen only narrowly avoided an awkward cultural collision – and didn’t exactly cover itself in glory even then. The German carmaker’s latest compact car was called up!, a supermini designed for the urban traveller. When it came to bringing out a special edition in everyone’s favourite opposite-to-white colour, the carmaker’s brainwave was to call it the Black up!. When VW executives in the UK heard of the plans, the *faux pas* was quickly exposed. To English-speaking audiences, the term “black up” is used to refer to the practise whereby white actors would impersonate African Americans using make up and body paint – a crudely offensive cultural anachronism which few if any performers would dream of repeating today.

Volkswagen’s response? In Britain, this special edition version was known as the up! Black, although across the rest of Europe the Black up! continued to be sold. Not, in our opinion, an expert piece of localisation. This rather superficial response to the offensive misnomer caused [a media stir](#) that did Volkswagen’s public reputation no favours at all.

The Ugly

Honda: making a name for itself (in all the wrong ways)

Honda is one of the world's most successful car manufacturers and clearly knows a thing or two about successful localisation. However, the Japanese giant's cultural radar seriously malfunctioned in 2001 when it went to launch a new car in Sweden: the Honda Fitta. Because, to the Swedes (and, incidentally to fellow Scandinavians in Norway and Denmark), the word *fitta* is a slang term for the female genitals. As the shockingly inappropriate mistake became clear, Honda worked hard to clear up the mess. The result? The Honda Jazz become the European name for this model, but a painfully awkward backtrack is not easily forgotten.

Ford: a slogan to die for

In every gangster movie you're likely to see, we all know that the drill for getting rid of dead bodies is to move it from the scene of the crime by stashing it in the trunk of your car and getting rid of it in more secluded surroundings. This is not, however, an automotive benefit that most car manufacturers usually seek to highlight in the advertising.

Inadvertently, Ford did just that when it introduced a new marketing campaign in Europe which read "Every car has a high-quality body". Of course, in most languages, the word "body" was easily understood as referring to the shell of an automobile. When translated for the Belgian market, however, the slogan read "Every car has a high-quality corpse". Unless you're in the showroom with Tony Soprano or Vito Corleone, we suggest this is not a wise sales tactic. Our advice? Localise first and let the mafia find their own preferred method of human disposal later.

Found that interesting?

If you're not already signed up to our newsletter, email marketing@thisisalpha.com to receive lots more great articles that will help you on your journey to going global.