



MultiLingual

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July/August 2014

Region Focus: Asia

The future of technology in ASL translation



Localizers could help brands find the “love”

I “I’m not necessarily lovin’ it.” This is what Japan is saying to McDonald’s, with the global fast food icon experiencing declining sales and profits in a key market. Last year, McDonald’s Japan shuffled leadership. After a disastrous first half of 2013 in which profits dropped by more than 40%, president Eiko Harada, who had presided over six years of growth, stepped down to be replaced by Sarah Casanova. A year later, the company is still struggling to attract customers and redefine itself in an increasingly competitive market.

What to do? How to help?

I suspect many of us in the localization industry would be thrilled to be invited to the table to help overcome such a challenge. But with a few notable exceptions, we generally are not. I wonder why? As insightful cultural and linguistic experts, often with significant networks and resources in the global markets in which these brands operate, more of us ought to be involved upstream instead of downstream. Besides, as a Japanese man who grew up loving American culture — and eating my fair share of Big Macs — I ought to know something about Japanese McDonald’s, both as a customer and as a localization specialist.

I decided to do some anecdotal market research and polled several friends in Japan about McDonald’s. I came away with some key themes: McDonald’s is not trendy; it is not as fast or convenient as it needs to be; customers are confused by the store experience; it is too expensive.

McDonald’s once was a hot spot in Japan, in the same way that California chain In-N-Out Burger was an instant hit in my town, Dallas, when they expanded here. I remember in high school in Tokyo, it was considered cool to take a date to McDonald’s. As you might expect, that buzz has long worn off. Today, young people often prefer to take food back home to hang out. They may opt for the local convenience store that is fast, has a wider variety, and frequently costs less. Starbucks may be as close as you get to a “new kid in town” vibe in Japan. My niece, age 23, is willing to wait in line at Starbucks and pay more to buy coffee and meet friends there. She appreciates the extra whipped cream they give her, the clean environment and the chipper service.

My niece and others are less happy to wait in line at McDonald’s. Introducing the McCafé concept increased store traffic and countered Starbucks and other competitors, but then lines grew longer. A plan to speed things up by removing menus at the ordering counter and using paper menus passed to customers in line appears to have backfired.

McCafé has also caused a kind of split personality for the stores. McDonald’s has long appealed to families in Japan with the notion that you can bring children and feed them at a reasonable price in a family-friendly environment. Today,

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Takeaway

some mothers with noisy children shy away from McDonald's because it is full of businessmen having coffee.

These issues are compounded by the perception that McDonald's is too expensive, or, more precisely, just as expensive as many other options. McDonald's Japan has frequently succeeded by marketing value, such as Harada's successful ¥100 menu campaign. Other McDonald's Japan options, such as premium sandwiches, are not really value items. One friend told me she goes to McDonald's less than she used to because of higher pricing. What Americans know as "extra value meals" are getting more expensive, so she chooses to go to family style restaurants for the same cost and a wider variety of food.

What does a brand do once the infatuation phase has ended, which presumably even Starbucks will face? Every difficulty is an opportunity to change perceptions. For McDonald's

Japan, my takeaway is this: it has been a long time since you were trendy. This is okay, and you may or may not become trendy again by introducing a wasabi mayo kobe burger with pickled ginger, though I would like to try that. But you could be like an old, reliable friend. People love old friends, too. You practically invented convenience food, so I know you will conquer the logistical problems. Old friends tend to be good listeners — it is one of the skills that earns you old friends status. By listening to customers' practical needs, the relationship can continue. And don't forget to smile.

Sarah Casanova is an adept executive. No doubt McDonald's Japan has gathered all this information. The point remains, however, that those of us in the localization industry could be the ones to provide it to McDonald's or any other client. "I am a translator," you may say. "You are a translator," your client may say. In fact, you are

much more. You are a source of information. You are feet on the ground. You are an analyst of raw information, able to reveal salient knowledge.

I asked a Hispanic retail marketing expert about this, Roberto Siewczynski, executive vice president of Catapult Marketing. He replied, "There is a reason certain expressions and jokes sometimes do not translate, because they are designed for a particular culture. There is an opportunity to leverage localization experts beyond translation competency. Ultimately they are also cultural experts. Rather than assigning translation projects, companies should first consider a qualitative read from these experts. You might say that they can tell you if the joke translates."

Perhaps for many of us in the localization industry, our challenge is a question of customer perception, which sounds a lot like the challenge McDonald's faces. **M**

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