



## The advertising campaign that misfired: Desastrin – your perfect painkiller

A pharmaceutical company decided to place an ad for a newly developed painkiller - Desastrin. The name of the product is, of course, fictitious. The idea of the campaign was to cover also countries with a high illiteracy rate. Therefore written text was to be avoided as much as possible. The message was to be expressed almost exclusively with non-verbal means.

The central message was expressed by a sequence of faces. The first face was a person obviously suffering from great pain. The next picture showed the same face, but already suffering much less and the third and last picture showed a happy, smiling face, with no sign of pain at all.

Great care was taken to preserve the local flavour- the faces chosen were representative of the region.



1- 2 – 3 – gone is the pain with Desastrin, your perfect painkiller!

After the ad had appeared and posters had been posted everywhere, sales dropped dramatically in some areas. The advertising agency could not detect a plausible reason for this development.

### Solution:

Sometimes mistakes in intercultural communication have seemingly trivial causes, but the reasons for communication breakdowns are very often the same. We tend to interpret what we see in terms of what is familiar to us. In Western countries we read texts from left to right, and when we scan billboards or ads also from left to right, beginning in the top left corner, then clockwise to the right, then we jump down

to the lower left corner and so on.

Readers in Arab countries or Israel scan texts from right to left. As a consequence, those readers in Arab countries will have come to the following interpretation of the ad: What we see is a person obviously feeling well at first; next, this person take a pill and immediately feels worse and obviously is in great pain at stage three. The message is quite clear: Don't touch this dangerous stuff!

Similar consequences are to be expected with the placement of information on website.

Conclusion: What looks trivial at first sight may not always be that trivial at all.

You can find more intercultural business stories from our expert Professor Jürgen Beneke in our [news-archive](#). We are at your service as consultants, trainers and coaches to support your navigation through challenging cross-cultural situations and can support you

in developing your holistic company-wide diversity strategy. Send us an [e-mail](#) or give us a call +49 (0)6221 – 735 13 71.

*Source: J. Althaus (1982: 95): „Wahrnehmung einer Bildfolge im amerikanischen und europäischen Raum sowie in Arabien“. In: Die Übertragbarkeit von Werbekonzeptionen auf Märkte. Frankfurt, Bern*