



Cultural Differences: This is how we do it in America¹

By Shelle Rose Charvet

Speakers, trainers and consultants who leave their own environment are called upon to demonstrate knowledge and expertise way beyond their area of expertise. They need to be able to figure out what works and doesn't work in other cultures. For example, many sales and persuasion strategies which work in one culture can be ineffective elsewhere. Compared to many countries, the United States has what I call an "enthusiastic" culture. It is commonly believed in the US that unless you demonstrate that you are visibly energized, passionate and totally excited by your topic; American audiences may not "buy-into" your message.

The same is not necessarily true in Europe. Using the metaphor of '*buying-in*' to a message is an American way of thinking. European audiences often do not like being "*sold*" anything. They would rather have the information presented in a more objective way, being invited to decide for themselves if they agree.

There are certainly exceptions to these principles: If an American speaker has 'guru' status, then audiences around the globe are just as likely to swoon adoringly at the guru's feet and be seduced by everything on offer.

One reason that the British and other Europeans object to the US enthusiastic hard-sell approach is that when you are enthusiastic about something, at a below-conscious level, you are sending the message that **you** know what is good for your audience; that you are *deciding for them*. Many people reject being told what to do, even if it is only implied by the enthusiastic jumping up and down of the speaker. Canadian audiences for example, while raising their eyebrows, often divide by 10 (or more) the claims for instant success made by US speakers. On the other hand, British, European or Canadian speakers and trainers are often criticized as too intellectual by US audiences.

How can one adapt an enthusiastic approach to Britain and Europe? One option is to build slowly. Start at a slightly higher level of energy than your group is in at the beginning of your session; create credibility and rapport and as soon as you sense they are on board, begin to elevate your energy and passion level. This will avoid the "in your face" approach that many Europeans find offensive. Self-deprecating humor is a great way to start to establish rapport as long as you know what is funny for your audience.

Even some of the messages promoted by speakers and trainers from one region of the planet are unpalatable to audiences elsewhere. The "follow your passion", "live your dreams" mantra can be unconvincing in places where life is not about getting what you want (the pursuit of happiness). If life is about doing what you are *supposed* to do, the "follow your heart and everything shall be yours" message seems as realistic as pigs that can fly. (The French would say: "that will happen when chickens have teeth." ("*quand les poules auraient des dents*").

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Logic is also culturally influenced. While many Americans use the Irish/Jewish story-telling method to illustrate ideas, to get everyone on the same page and make their case, Europeans are often expecting a more Cartesian approach. René Descartes created the scientific method and it is very linear. Cause-effect-consequence. Definition of terms and provision of supporting evidence is *de rigueur*. I am not saying that that audiences outside the US are not just as enamored of stories as folks in America; I think everyone loves a good story. I use stories and metaphors when speaking to groups in many countries to illustrate in visual terms the evidence I present for my ideas. By the same token, speakers and trainers schooled in the academic approach will need to add visual metaphors when speaking in North America.

The issue with providing supporting evidence when you speak in Europe can also be delicate if most of your evidence is based on American data. Here's how I get around that problem. I let people know when my data is American and ask them which parts might fit in their country and I may even suggest that it could be different in their country. This is a crucial strategy to avoid being perceived as "*the ugly American*" who seems to be saying that what is good for America is good for the world. People in every place (and even every company) believe they are different and unique and it is important to honor this as a speaker.

Then there are the regional differences in North America. Canadians are constantly saying "I am not American"; while Mexicans with whom I've worked in DF (Mexico City) and Tabasco let no opportunity pass to say: "We are Americans too!" So much for the unifying force of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement).

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