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Business in China: Product Design Across Borders

Beware the onomatopoeia!

For companies based outside China, translating qualitative design parameters in terms that make sense to engineers in China is challenging. Sights, sounds, smells, textures and tastes are culturally influenced—not universal. In particular, describing a sound or taste across cultures is difficult.

Is the sound of a car door solidly slamming closer to the Chinese *gedeng* sound or the *guang* sound (“thump” and “slam”)? Is the sound of the laptop lid shutting closer to *kada* (“clack”) or *kacha* (“click”)? Is the *mala* taste more “hot”, “spicy” or “peppery”?

When members of product development teams literally speak different languages, there are extra considerations to being successful:

1. Start with clarity on the ultimate end user of the newly designed product. This dictates whether engineers should strive to match a Chinese parameter, a US parameter, or are creating a more global hybrid. (See “[Is Local Design the Key to the Throne?](#)” about the Numi smart toilet).

2. Co-locate team members. For best results physically place key design team members on both sides of the development group. For example—one Chinese team lead in the US and one American team lead in China—to bridge cultural translation gaps.

3. Prepare for trade-offs between cost, timeline, and results. Differences in language and perceptions across cultures add to design and development complexity. Achieving the exact desired result may take more time due to added need for explanations and examples. Locally available materials may or may not provide the desired effect. And so on.

4. Conduct cultural communication training. Provide cross-cultural training to **both sides** of the development team. Allow team members in all locations to have the same basis of knowledge about how the “other side” works, thinks and communicates for best results and ROI.

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