Twelve Ways US Tech Firms Fail When Targeting European Media (And How to Avoid Them)

Martin Veitch shares his tips on how to get the most out of speaking to European journalists

Martin Veitch says he has been 'knocking around' in journalism for about a quarter of a century, mostly covering business and technology. In 1990, he was at VNU's PC Week when 'online' meant CompuServe and CIX. After Ziff-Davis set up in the UK he went to PC Direct, a catalogue-sized magazine charting the rise of Dell and others, staying for the budding of the World Wide Web and the Great Email Plague of 1995. In 1996 he went paperless with ZDNet News before joining a grown-up enterprise newspaper, IT Week, and, much later, a grown-up magazine, CIO. After a hiatus in PR, he is now editorial director of IDG Connect, a site covering the globalisation of technology markets and impacts. He is thought to be the world's only Geordie to write a blog about sherry.

White paper

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When is a global village not a global village, as Marshall McLuhan might once have pondered? When you're targeting the European press, for one. Probably tens of thousands of US tech firms have come to this vast continent with the assumption that they can communicate to people in the same way as in the home of the brave and land of the free. Many of them must have left broken and disappointed. Persuading people to write about your widgets, binary code and gizmos can be hard, especially if you don't take into account the many moving parts that make up the complex patchwork that is Europe. Here are 12 traps that Americans can fall into and some basic advice for starting to understand how to swerve them.

Not Differentiating Between Countries

This is the big one, I suppose, so let's afford it a bit of space. The world may be shrinking due to cheap air travel and the internet and so on but when talking to European customers and their press, each market should be treated as an individual entity… and then broken down from there.

The cliché states that Americans think of Europe as one country pronounced 'Yourrrp'. But if the citizens of the United States have

managed to produce the PC, iPhone, Google search, Windows and the world's most popular microprocessors then they can probably figure out the basics of geography, culture and currency.

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I don't think many Americans really think in this way but some do.

The problem is this: a growing American company will typically expand by extending its geographic reach. After north America, Europe is an obvious place to go because 'it's a large market' so the company sets up a European office (or worse, an EMEA office but that's another story). But the European office is really catering for a series of

markets, each with their own unique characteristics.

For example, Brits famously don't see themselves as very European at all. We come from a cold wet island, speak English and have our own currency. Our friends in Spain meanwhile have a large country on a peninsula with a desert, lots of mountains and they speak Spanish when buying things with euros. They sometimes fight bulls and dance flamenco, although not as much as stereotypes suggest. The stereotypical Brit hunts foxes and takes a keen interest in morris dancing although most of us want both of these to be outlawed. Pretty different.

But that's just the start of it. In the UK, the Scots might devolve, you pay a road toll to get into Wales and England has a tricky situation in Northern Ireland, which is on no account to be confused with the Republic of Ireland. Confused? You will be, so make sure you hire people who know the local markets.

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Not Understanding Regional Differences. I am a person from Newcastle in the north of England and thus liable to be generalised by my friends in the south as workshy, unintelligent, presumably unemployed and difficult to understand. I point out to them that while the north of England gave the world the railway, coal, light bulbs and the industrial revolution, the south gave back mass unemployment and jellied eels. As a 'Geordie' I don't want to be confused with people from London or even Sunderland even though I could probably cycle there without breaking sweat. It's similar all over Europe where, having been around for a very long time, we have built up a full hand of languages, religions, prejudices, stereotypes and cultural sensitivities. In Belgium, the Walloons and the Flemish sometimes differ. In Italy, the north and south aren't always big fans of each other. And so on.

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Not Providing Local Relevance. I don't think it's true that a Czech will have no truck with a successful implementation in Poland if it's interesting enough but it certainly helps if you appreciate that your Marks and Spencer case study might earn a shrug and a 'bof' from Jean-Pierre in France and that your Carrefour one might not be 'sehr gut' for Gunther in Munich. There are also differences in preferences

regarding how people like to create and consume media. Opinion pieces from suppliers can be popular in some markets but are a waste of time in others, for example, so find out what works where before committing to pricey pan-European content creation campaigns and translation plans.

Not Leaving Americanisms At Home. To a depressing degree, many of us the world over speak American English without even knowing we are doing so, such is the pervasiveness of Hollywood. When Scottish Nationalist Party leader Alex Salmond recently (in October 2013) suggested his opponents "Step up to the plate – or step out of the debate", he was using a baseball reference. But that's no excuse for speaking as if in a Silicon Valley meeting of technology marketers about soup-to-nuts, end-to-end turnkey solutions, charged for on a freemium basis and providing a compelling deliverable. It pays to take it easy with Americanisms, jargon and marketing chat.

Over-Reliance on Wire Stories. The generic release that gets pumped out via the big wire services tends to end up where it belongs… in the bin. If you're not even trying to tailor a story for a particular country, title or journalist then why should the writer bother? Even a couple of sentences at the top of an email showing empathy and some level of, you know, *interest*, in the targeted journalist's oeuvre will help your story stand out, but tailoring a story for a particular journalist will optimise your chances of him/her picking it up.

Focusing on Financials. Americans sometimes obsess over financials and the stock market while most of us in Europe don't rewind if we

miss those vital details of your share price, market cap, ticker symbol or 52-week high. That's perhaps because Americans own stock whereas over here in London, Paris, Milan, Madrid and Frankfurt, if we are lucky enough to have a spare million pounds or euros we put it down as a deposit for a one-bedroom flat.

Talking Tech. OK, so your new multifunctional computing device version 2.0 has a new font resolution rendering technology, a revamped user interface based on a new paradigm and comes bundled with the world's largest collection of clip art but, really, so what? A wise man once said that all stories centre on hearts and/or wallets. If you can't say why your product won't save us precious time, make our paymaster mega-corp more money, help us sleep more easily and spend more time with our loved ones then you're really just reeling off a specification, not telling a story.

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Not Understanding Stages of Adoption. It appears to be a rule of thumb that American companies will try pretty well

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anything to achieve that obscure object of desire, competitive advantage. The US tends to be an early adopter and then later the rest of the world might make a decision to fall in line at various times and for various reasons. Just because cloud computing is here and there, doesn't mean it's everywhere, so factor that in to your approach.

Not Relaxing A Bit. In California, having a drink at lunchtime will earn you the sack or counselling and everybody goes to the gym and eats raw Japanese fish. In Europe, most of us enjoy a drink or three and we don't mind too much if that edges into working life. If you're lunching with a journalist, don't skip the wine list: it's the most interesting part of the menu. The same goes for humour. The British default setting is to belittle each other with crudeness and cruelty... and that's just with friends and family. You probably don't want to be risqué but there's nothing wrong with cracking a smile and working towards getting to know the journalist a bit. Software may be eating the world but it hasn't conquered laughter or the human factor. Yet.

to corrupt... it's just a reflection of the lack of money that exists in the tech media business. It's quite common for journalists to accept all-expenses trips and then be highly critical of the paying company in their reports. Clearly this isn't an ideal situation but it exists.

Assuming Scale. The US has big buildings, big food and big companies but here the companies tend to be smaller and most technology sections of papers and tech-focused magazines are small and getting smaller, such are the pressures on the media. Keep in mind that some countries may only have two or three journalists interested in your type of news. That's yet another reason for staying sharply relevant to journalists and titles that only exist at all because they serve a very specific demographic.

Not Understanding Local Channels. Channels to market often remain highly localised despite attempts by many companies to become pan-European superpowers. Reading up on key distributors, resellers, retailers and the state of the direct sales markets locally will

are also strong.

Not Having Local Spokespeople. If the CEO is the only guy allowed to talk to the media, then you're going to disappoint a lot of people by keeping them waiting when they want a quote. A local speaker should be a point person who can speak the language of the journalist and understand location-specific issues and opportunities. They can also help ensure translations make sense.

To wrap up, the more I write this the more I realise how little I know about the media in other parts of Europe, despite 25 years knocking about at 'European' conferences. It's complicated and gets more complicated the deeper you go and that's why it makes sense to have people on your side who can steer you. Working with the media should be fun and a great opportunity to tell stories but it can also leave companies vulnerable to various scrapes. As ever, a little local knowledge will go a long way.

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European journalists can often be cynical, sceptical, negative, aggressive and often make little attempt to disguise their contempt. They are unlikely to be offended by your offering them free lunches or travel but this won't make them biddable or easy

help frame conversations. Face-to-face networking meetings are popular at the CIO level in the UK and Germany. Barcelona in Spain is a conference powerhouse for the whole of Europe while Dublin in Ireland and Lisbon in Portugal

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