



CASE 21

Selling Victoria's Secret in Saudi Arabia

Romantic

Understanding and respecting cultures (Ch 9)



When you see women in Saudi Arabia, all in long black wrapper dresses, you would not guess that, underneath, many of them wear fancy, colorful underwear. So these women in Saudi Arabia would seem to be a natural target market for Victoria's Secret. Except one big snag: Saudi culture does not permit open display of lingerie in a store.

Buying underwear is a nightmare for Saudi women. Since women salespersons are not allowed to sell in public places, stores that sell lingerie employ only male salespersons, and women customers must ask male salespersons for help in assessing their bra sizes. Once the bra size is determined, the salesperson would speak it out loud and an assistant would dig out the merchandise from hidden shelves. The whole experience of having to discuss their bodies with male salesmen is so embarrassing, that many women would just guess

Banners that hang from high ceilings and create the feminine ambience in the store
Lingerie Perdu Store in Saudi Arabia
Design: Chase Design Group, Los Angeles, U.S.A.

their bra size; as a result, a majority of Saudi women are reported to be wearing the wrong size bras.

It is against this background, that Lingerie Perdu, Lingerie Perdu Store in Saudi Arabia
Design: Chase Design Group, Los Angeles, U.S.A.

a Western style lingerie store opened on the first day of Ramadan in November 2001 on Tahlia Street in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. How, Al-Mashat, the store's owner did it is a lesson in creative trans-cultural marketing—marketing that respects a host culture's mores and yet creates a trans-cultural experience for the consumer.

The task of designing the store was assigned to Los Angeles based Chase Design. Chase chose the name Perdu, French for lost. Saudi Arabic women are fascinated with France, and France is the

Source: Logolounge.com

country they most associate with lingerie. It also captures the experience of a woman who enters the store and can happily feel lost in the two story store that features translucent glass and has mysterious ambiance.

Because of the Wahhabi principles of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia, stores can't show female body parts or pictures of women wearing lingerie. So what Chase Design did was to use language and poetry in a rich sensual way. First, it created a custom alphabet, altering English characters to look more like Arabic letters and vice versa. This bilingual wordmark appeared more sensual; and it bridged the visual gap between the English and Arabic letters. Then, it selected poetry and words that evoke the experience of wearing lingerie.

In the middle of the store, a large banner hangs from the ceiling to the floor, with these poetic words inscribed in English: Wrap this beautiful robe of words around you and dream. Also hanging are many other long banners with words like "passion," "love," "dreams" etc., inscribed both in English and Arabic. These words also appear on signage, display cases, and even shopping bags.

Because of Saudi laws, Perdu does not have any female employees. Lifelike mannequins are not allowed so

Perdu features abstract, fabric wrapped shapes. And, stores can't have mirrors in the dressing rooms. So, one day local religious police (called *mutawa*) came in and took down the mirrors in the store's fitting rooms. But mirrors or no mirrors, Saudi women are enjoying this new experience of shopping lingerie—Victoria Secret style. Minus of course the images of Tyra Banks.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Culture in Saudi Arabia seems to promote among women extreme modesty (where they should not flaunt their bodies); yet, many women there are as eager to acquire and consume the fashionable clothing and luxurious lingerie from western countries. What role does culture play in consumer desires—does it encourage or curb consumption?
2. Is it important for a marketer, especially a designer of physical marketspace (i.e., a store) to be fully aware of the culture of its customers? How did Chase Design Group, a U.S. firm, meet this challenge?
3. What lessons can we learn from this story about culture and marketing?

A poem by Shay Sayre (See story on facing page)

CHANGING FACES

*Cosmetic surgery is
a notion I entertain
regularly amid the
voices of caution that
punctuate my peace.*

*"Why not grow old like everyone else,"
snarls my son.
"If it will make you happy, dear"
smirks mom.*

*What do they know?
Do they have the skin of Cochise?
Do they view the world beneath billowing lids?
Do they dread passing reflective surfaces?*

*The knife is my magic wand,
a Maginot Line keeping
time on the other side.
I'll have no second thoughts,
I'll have no second thoughts*

Shay Sayre is a professor of consumer behavior at California State University at Fullerton.

Source: Excerpted from Shay Sayre, "Facelift Forensics: A Personal Narrative of Cosmetic Surgery," *Advances in Cons. Res.*, 1999, 26, 178-83. (Used by permission of the Assoc. for Consumer Research)

Note: Facing page: The face with markings is a stock photo, not of Shay Sayre.