

INTEGRATION OF LOCAL CULTURE AND PERCEPTION IN PROMOTION AND MARKETING OF SOLAR COOKERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides food for thought for participants (individuals as well as grass-roots and international organizations) to look deeply into the local culture and recognize the clients' thinking and attitude that might hinder the success of development project, and look for innovative ways to overcome them. Another important task is to integrate the knowledge and customs of local people to improve the chance of success for community development project. Last but not least, it is crucial to come up with smart marketing techniques, which could change people's taste and preferences in favor of the product and increase market demand for the product.

Keywords: development, local culture, marketing strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

Deforestation is happening around the world with an alarming rate. According to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization, South America suffered the largest net loss of forests between 2000 and 2005 which averaged around 4.3 million hectares per year. This was followed by Africa, which lost 4 million hectares annually. Therefore, promotion of solar energy devices including solar cookers seems more urgent than ever. However, besides working on improving the technology (more efficient and user friendly devices) it is necessary to look at the obstacles facing the promotion of solar cookers, especially the CooKit in East Africa, and to come up with means to improve the marketing aspects of the product.

"It is only a cardboard!" I frequently heard this statement about CooKit while I was SCI's Field Projects Director, and it was recently echoed by Margarete Owino, SCI's East Africa Director in her article in April 2005 issue of

Solar Cooker Review. Obviously, the statement shows the low prestige and status perception of the local people associated with using CooKit. It confirms the fact that local women are skeptical about the performance and usefulness of the device, which its simplicity was perceived a virtue by those who designed it in the West.

There is no doubt that it takes time for people to accept a new idea, but also it seems equally challenging to promote a simple and useful device if the users or customers perceive it as a low prestige or low status product. This paper will examine the importance of local culture in the success and failure of developing projects. It will explore the use of marketing strategy, especially appropriate advertisement techniques, to overcome the cultural hindrances of promoting solar cookers.

2. IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE AND LOCAL CUSTOMS

As we know culture gives people a sense of identity, how they should behave, and what they should be doing. Culture and local traditions have been used constantly to explain the progress and failures of different development projects. In order to work effectively with local people we need to examine their values and norms, beliefs and attitudes, relationships, mental processes and learning, work habits and practices, and many other cultural characteristics.

In forest management projects in Central America, understanding of working practices of rural women and their unique and valuable knowledge about trees and forest products in healing and cooking have led to successful engagement of rural women in reforestation and agro-forestry projects. In Central America women gather nuts, fruits, medicine and oils from trees for use at home, and sometimes for sale in local markets. These activities give rural women valuable knowledge about trees and forest products.

For instance in Nicaragua, women know which tree species last longest as fuel and which kinds are more appropriate for cooking in terms of enhancing food flavor. And while in Nicaragua eucalyptus was accepted by men who were planning an energy project, women did not like this species for fuel because they knew its use would give food a bitter flavor. With this knowledge the project was changed to use Eucalyptus as a medicinal plant and not for fuel wood.

In contrast to the above example, in Kenya the effort of a development project to alleviate the burden of carrying water from long distance by women was not successful because the suggestion of using donkeys was not acceptable to women. Even though donkeys were around to do the job, women perceived it as low prestige and old fashion way of transporting things.

Therefore, in East Africa understanding its cultural characteristics like kinship systems, respect for elders, and the most important, the tradition of sharing that continues even as individuals move away from their tribal origins will increase our awareness and give insights for the best promotional strategy. For example, if several families or neighbors can afford to buy a solar cooker, they might share the ownership and use it in different days. This will help them to avoid the waiting period of paying the installments and see the benefit of the cooker much sooner. There might be other options to capitalize on the culture of sharing in Africa in order to promote solar cookers. Considering all these about the local customs and traditions, we must be aware of the fact that a unique global culture is emerging. With influence of mass media and new telecommunication devices like Internet even in the remote areas people have become accustomed to see new technologies, which are out of their reach. So by knowing what is available in the global market and the fascination for sophisticated devices, the local people, unfortunately, have a tendency to look down on a simple device that is more appropriate for their conditions in terms of availability and cost. Therefore, grass root organizations, NGO's, and local people that are involved with dissemination of appropriate technology have a huge challenge to promote the idea: "simple is beautiful." And it is here that we need innovative promotional strategies to achieve our goal.

3. PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

Commercial advertising media include printed flyers, billboards, radio, cinema and TV ads, magazines, bus stop benches, sides of buses, taxicab doors, etc. Some of the techniques that are used to convince people to buy a

product and change their attitudes towards a product include repetition, bandwagon, testimonials, pressure, appeal to emotion, and association. Word of mouth method of advertising is a low cost method which is widely used to promote a product.

These advertising techniques which are used to promote commercial goods and services can be also used to inform, educate, and motivate the public about issues such as deforestation, energy conservation, using new devices, etc. It seems with having problem of low status perception towards simple devices the "association technique" might be an appropriate method of advertisement for the devices like solar cookers. In this technique advertisers try to associate a given product with a desirable imagery to make it seem equally desirable. They use an attractive model, celebrities, beautiful landscape in the background, etc. to create the desired association. For example, in promoting solar cookers if a road side billboard shows a celebrity or an important prestigious woman using a CookKit, it might help to change people's perception and encourage the desire to use the cooker because that important person is using it. Also, besides having the billboard in a fixed place, local people can be paid a small amount of money to hold the attractive billboard in different public places to increase peoples' exposure to the idea of using solar cooker. The low cost associated with using billboard has a great advantage over using other commercial media.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is known that success and failure of development projects are dependent on how compatible the new technology or new way of life is with the local traditions and customs. Equally important is people's perception about the technology that is going to be promoted. The challenges faced by non-profit and grass-root organizations are: (1) to identify the local customs and traditions and their way of thinking, and (2) to come up with appropriate marketing strategies to promote and disseminate the new technology or product to improve the lives of people.

A few characteristics of East African culture were mentioned in this paper along with some suggestions regarding appropriate advertisement techniques to promote solar cookers and other appropriate technologies. However, the subject needs to be explored more by NGO's, grass root organizations and other groups that are involved with development projects.

The following recommendations are in line with these needs.

1. Create a country or regional workshop of several groups including:

- Grass root organizations
- Indigenous groups or African tribal groups
- Representatives from international organization and donors
- Experts on anthropology and sociology
- Experts on marketing strategies

The participants can go to several field trips to observe local people and talk to them. Following the field trips, the workshop can be dedicated to discussion, and analysis of their observations. At the end, the group decides on key issues and identifies recommendations for local or regional promotional strategies.

2. Develop a participatory research within grass root organization, university experts, and other interested groups to identify related cultural issues which should be taken into consideration for successful dissemination of simple and useful devices like solar cookers. This research or initiative can be supported by donor agencies and foundations.

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6. BIOSKETCH

Mahnaz Saremi Shakerin received her Ph.D. in Agricultural Economics and Economic Development from Oregon State University in the USA. She has been an adjunct professor since 1999 at Delta College, where she teaches economic courses. Dr. Shakerin was Field Projects Director (1996-97) and Research Coordinator & International Trainer (1995-96) at Solar Cookers International, Sacramento, USA. She was Deputy Director of Marketing Section in the Range and Pasture Development Fund (1975-78) in Iran. She has published fifteen articles in journals and trade magazines.