Chapter 12
Cultural Frame Switching: Marketing Implications

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ABSTRACT
This chapter discusses a phenomenon referred to as cultural frame switching; a psychological process experienced by bicultural individuals whereby exposure to a culturally significant cue or stimulus causes the individual to instinctively process the information through one of two cultural mind frames – one more closely aligned to the individual’s cultural identity as a member of the dominant culture, the other more closely aligned to the individual’s identity as a member of an ethnic or immigrant and usually subordinate culture. As a result of this differential activation, the individual then processes the information and responds within the cultural mind frame activated by the cue. This chapter will look at: the antecedents of this phenomenon; the many cues which can activate either cultural identity; existing research on the subject matter; and the many ways corporate America and Madison Avenue may be overlooking this research thereby missing a valuable opportunity.

INTRODUCTION
Cultural frame switching is a phenomenon whereby a cultural cue can engage or activate one of the two cultural identities bicultural individuals are believed to possess. As a result of activating one of the two distinct cultural identities a bicultural embodies, the same individual will then process information and respond to it within the distinct cultural framework corresponding to that cue.

This can occur because in the process of becoming bicultural, these individuals will often develop two somewhat distinct associative networks in their mind. Depending on the cultural significance of the stimuli they process, it is believed one network will be more involved in the processing than the other. As time passes by, each associative network becomes more and more ‘attuned’ to each of the two cultures the bicultural embraces. In a nutshell, these two associative networks correspond with each of the two cultural identities the individual holds; to the extent that the activated cultural identity may have easier,
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faster, and more meaningful access to one associative network more so than the other. And the more dis-
similar the two cultures are, the more dissimilar the contents of each associative network are likely to be.

There already exists empirical research which shows marketers can strategically use language to
influence which of the two bicultural individual’s identities become activated, and as a result can make
their selling messages more relevant and persuasive. Here I will review that research but I will also con-
sider what other cues a marketer might be able to use in order to influence how a bicultural individual
processes a selling message.

Following a more descriptive definition of cultural frame switching, I will offer a comprehensive
description of the acculturation process. I will then describe what a bicultural individual is and how it
is believed these dual identities come to exist. This will be followed by a review of research which has
shown these dual identities actually do exist. Next I will explain how sociocultural and socio-economic
forces in the U.S. have facilitated the creation of these new dual identities in so many immigrants in the
U.S. nowadays. I will then shift our focus to marketing and will briefly summarize the aforementioned
research which has shown advertisers can use language to activate a distinct cultural identity and mindset
in a bicultural individual. This will be followed by an exploration of what other cultural cues might be
available to marketers who wish to have the most favorable response to their selling message when they
target bicultural consumers.

BACKGROUND

What is Cultural Frame Switching?

Cultural frame switching can be described as a specific type of priming, which changes a person’s abil-
ity to identify, produce or classify an item as a result of a previous encounter with that, or a related item
(Schacter, Dobbins, & Schnyer, 2004). By activating certain associations in memory, an individual is
more likely to think about those associated concepts, ideas, or beliefs and/or to behave in a way that is
consistent with those ideas and beliefs, when asked to process information.

In the case of a bicultural individual – an individual who has fully embraced two distinct cultures
(usually the native/immigrant culture and the host country culture) – the associations which can be dif-
ferentially activated correspond to each of the two cultures the individual embraces.

For example, an individual who was born and raised in a collectivist society and later emigrates to
a country where individualism is more likely to be valued, may eventually develop two distinct cultural
identities one which aligns itself with collectivist ideals and beliefs and the other which aligns itself with
individualistic ideals and beliefs. Cultural frame switching is said to have occurred when this individual
suddenly responds within a collectivist mindset when exposed to any cue the individual associates with
collectivism, or within an individualist mindset when exposed to any cue the individual associates with
‘individualism.’

Acculturation = Change

According to the classical definition of acculturation, in order for acculturation to occur two conditions
must be present 1) there needs to be first hand and continuous contact or interaction between members
of two different cultures and; 2) as a result, there has to occur some type of change in the cultural be-
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