

Webinar: Signs & Symbols presented by the Culture & Ethnic Diversity Network



On Thursday 26th October 2023 the Culture & Ethnic Diversity Network hosted a webinar to raise awareness of and respect for different cultural and/or religious signs & symbols and explain how they can often be misinterpreted.

What is the difference between Signs and Symbols?

Comparison	Sign	Symbol
Definition	Sign on its own is a language, and it is used to communicate between people.	The symbol represents something that certain groups of people accept.
Nature	Signs in nature are informative, advisory, mandatory, prohibitory, and warning	Symbols are abstract or subjective
Meaning	A sign may have only one meaning, and it may also be mandatory to be followed by everyone.	A symbol may only be targeted towards only a certain group of people and not be mandatory for everyone to follow.
Interpretations	A sign only has one meaning and thus cannot be interpreted in any other way.	A symbol has many meanings, and its interpretations may vary as people perceive it differently.

Misconceptions of Signs & Symbols – Examples:

The Swastika

Since its adoption by the National Socialist German Workers' [Nazi] party, the swastika has become associated with cruelty, hatred, and totalitarianism.



But in its original meaning, the swastika is a religious symbol representing concepts such as peace, creativity, prosperity, and good fortune. Its modern name derives from the Sanskrit *svastika*, which means conducive to well-being.

The swastika was used in the sculpture of Jain temples and is associated with Vishnu and Shiva in Indian mythology. It was introduced into Japan through Buddhism and is associated with several Japanese and Chinese deities.

666

The number 666 represents the Christian devil in Western society. In the book of Revelations, 666 is the name of the wild beast, so it is regarded as a devilish number.

Those who worship the beast would receive its symbol. In the Bible, the number six implies imperfection, while the number seven generally suggests perfection or completeness.



In some interpretations, the wild beast symbolizes human political systems since nationalism has become a dominant form of religion in modern times.

However, in Chinese culture, 666 holds positive connotations and is associated with positive energies.

Signs & Symbols in a business context

Companies also need to be mindful of the kinds of messages that they put out to ensure people feel included and safe. A lack of understanding and appreciation of cultural and/or religious signs & symbols can often land companies in “hot water” and get them into trouble.

Example 1: Heineken 1994 World Cup Campaign

One example of this is Heineken’s 1994 World Cup Campaign. They decided to print flags of all the participating countries onto their beer bottles. This included Saudi Arabia where the dominant faith is Islam which forbids the consumption of alcohol. Therefore, the use of their flag on an alcoholic product was met my outrage from the Muslim community.



Heineken was then forced to recall and discontinue this promotion, leading to loss of revenue and a bruised public image.

This demonstrates what can happen when a business uses religious iconography without accounting for religious cultural norms.

Example 2: Nike’s Samoan Tattoo Women’s Sportswear

Another example to demonstrate this would be Nike’s line of Women’s Sportswear that used a Samoan Tattoo called Pe’a as its print.



The Samoans are an ethnic group native to Polynesia and the Pe’a tattoo is a symbol of high honour, reserved for male chiefs in Samoan society hence the use of this tattoo on women’s wear specifically caused such outrage and was considered a cultural crime.

Questions raised in the session:

1. Have we come across any tools or methods to explore or catch whether you are inadvertently putting something potentially offensive within a document / product?

This will be taken to the Group DEI Steerco, to explore if we offer anything like this and research will be conducted by the Active Network. However, if any colleagues are aware of anything like this that already exists within DS Smith, please do reach out to Jessica.heap@dssmith.com