Asian firms focus on products and neglect customer experience: Marketing guru

**Marking whiz and author**

**PROFESSOR BEND SCHMITT, 54, is the executive director of Nanyang Technological University’s new Institute for Asia Consumer Insight.**

The marketing professor still holds his post as a professor at Columbia Business School in New York, where he heads the Centre on Global Leadership for Sustainability.

He completed his Phd in psychology at the University of British Columbia. His research—which focuses on experimental marketing, brand management and international business—has been published in leading marketing and psychology journals.

The American, who also holds a German passport, has been in Singapore researching and teaching in Asia for 20 years.

He has authored or co-authored seven books, which have been translated into 20 languages, including Experimental Marketing (1999), Customer Experience Management (2001) and Big Think Strategy (2017). He just completed his eighth book on customer happiness, Happy Customer, Happy Business, which will be published next year.

**Schmitt, director of the Institute of Asian Consumer Insight, says Asian firms must position themselves well or risk being edged out by Western brands.**

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**ST INTERVIEW**

Q&A

What are the key differences between Asian consumers and Western consumers?

Established research has basically found that the consumer lifestyle in Japan is different from that in the US. An Asian is an individual who is young, fashion-conscious and wealthy.

What does that mean for Western companies in Asia?

The answer is that Western companies need to be more creative. The Japanese take a lot of care to create their own identity and to brand themselves. Western companies need to copy and develop these strategies.

In South Korea and Japan, it is not unusual to see women wearing sunglasses in winter. In Singapore, women wear the same kind of boots in winter.

What have you observed about the Singaporean consumer and why do you think that many put Western brands on a pedestal?

Singaporeans like to complain, especially about service. They also complain about the MRT, which is the best train system in the world. They are very critical. They also have high standards and they want more.

They are proud of their country. Look at National Day, people come to watch the parade. They are very proud of their country.

On the other hand, they are partial to Western brands and marketing because they are demanding. I think it simply has to do with the lack of success of Singaporean brands. Singapore is a small country, and there is a lot of competition in terms of creative and creative talent.

In a sense, one hand, Singaporean consumers want to go local, but on the other hand they think many brands are not quite there yet.

Do you think that, with globalization and the convergence of cultures, there will be one universal consumer one day?

Yes, to a certain extent. I think cultural differences and cultural diversity will be more pronounced. In Asia, people now do the same things as in the West. They are more international and more creative.

Eating patterns are also converging. The infrastructure in cities looks the same.

Marketing and management here also end up less similar.

He records ordering a cup of tea at a restaurant last week. The waiter insist- ed on repeating his order. “One tea,” he said, looking at him for approval.

That, he says, is common in Singapore and the world and all the markets are flooded with new products that are so similar, marketing will use more uniformity.