

CASE STUDY:

Localizing Potato Chips

Eve Lindemuth Bodeux |  @ebodeux
March 2016



During a trip to France, I purchased a bag of Lay's potato chips at the Paris airport. The bag of chips turned out to be a virtual case study in localization. According to the packaging, these chips were distributed in France by Pepsico France SNC. Pepsico Corporation is, of course, the maker of Pepsi and an iconic American company headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia USA.

Roasted Chicken Potato Chips

The bag of chips caught my eye because the flavor promoted on the package was *Poulet Rôti et Thym* (Roast Chicken with Thyme). Many flavors of chips are available in supermarket aisles in the US, but this is not one of them. In fact, at first, I was shocked: to an American palate, this flavor is not particularly appealing. But, I was hungry, so I thought I'd give it a try and the chips tasted exactly like roast chicken.

Some Foods Get Lost in Translation

This impromptu case study goes hand in hand with an article about the strategy that most major US food corporations should take when selling various food products in international markets. The article, [*Some Foods Get Lost in Translation*](#), dates from 2010 but the issues it addresses are still very relevant. It emphasizes that companies should carefully pick the products they wish to market and sell abroad (which, even today, is not always the case). As the article warns, "Food, more than most products, is an expression of culture."



The Steps in Localizing a Potato Chip

A review of the Paris potato chip packaging leads to several observations:

1. The flavors have been "localized," or modified, for a specific target market (France). Some of the chip flavors selected for the French market are very different than those sold in the US (and would, presumably, meet with little success on American shelves, judging, unscientifically, by my own initial reaction). Others are standbys that can also be found in stores within the United States.
2. The company's approach to translation is inconsistent (and hopefully a conscious decision rather than an oversight) in that the names of "standard" American flavors were left in

English and then translated into French below images of the various flavors, but some names were written directly in French, and one flavor name used both languages together.

3. The packaging differed from American packaging. Of course it is in French instead of English, but it also approached nutritional information differently and the weight of the product is not on the front of the bag, for example. This is a result of different regulatory requirements for pre-packaged food in the two countries.

The company's additional flavors listed on the back of the chip bag include:

- *Barbecue*—a flavor well-known to Americans
- *Bolognaise* (Bolognese)—perhaps a little off-putting to Americans when applied to potato chips
- *Spicy*—translated as *épicé*
- *Fromage* (Cheese)
- *Moutarde Pickles*—written using a mixture of both French and English, with an asterisk noting for the French public that pickles are condiments
- *Nature*—which means *plain* in French without any negative connotation and implies “simple, without unnecessary additives”
- *Poulet Rôti* Format XL— Roasted Chicken Extra Large (referring to size)
- *Salt & Vinegar*—listed in English and translated by *Sel et Vinaigre*, using an asterisk
- *Cream & Onion*—listed in English and translated by *Crème et Oignon*, using an asterisk

Providing translations using an asterisk while leaving certain flavors in English impedes immediate understanding in French (the target language) and is a bit cumbersome to read. However, translating foreign words in ads and packaging is required by French law. To leave some flavor names in English, Lay's must have felt strongly that these names carry a level of cachet, or desired consistency throughout their global product line. The company had to abide by French law, resulting in what may be considered, at times, an awkward presentation.

The French packaging does not specify “potato chips” on the front of the bag, but communicates this only by the well-known brand name (Lay's) and a picture of potato chips (and chicken). Nutritional information is displayed on the front of the packaging as well as on the back, emphasizing that the chips contain 63% less fat (than *what* is not specified on the front, but on the back it notes: 63% less fat *than the average chip*). The back of the package lists an easy-to-read nutritional table (presumably required by law, but a handy reference nonetheless).

Conclusion: Localization Required for Success!

This product shows that anything can be localized—and that certain products *must* be. It takes communication and cooperation between various departments within a company (especially one as large as Pepsico) to successfully adapt and bring a product to new markets. For example, the product development group and the marketing team surely worked together to create Lay's line of potato chips sold in France. There must have also been close cooperation across national borders, between the American and French teams. In such a project, each player must pay careful attention to the target market and can't hope to sell American products while ignoring cultural (and regulatory) requirements in international markets around the world.

Enlarged Images of Packaging

